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Lady Helen's Vow; OR, THE MOTHER'S SECRET.

A Romance of Love and Honor.

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POOR YOUNG GIRL," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

THE BARON'S DAUGHTER.

BETWEEN St. Orme's Head and the little hamlet of Eymouth in Scotland, stands an irregular stone mansion, many times larger than the houses of the sheep-farmers scattered thinly about the neighborhood.

The walls are half-covered with ivy; the situation is sequestered; the rear overhangs a rocky declivity. Some upper windows are closed and overgrown with creepers. The landscape surrounding it is shut in by barren hills, with a distant view of the purple-gray summits of the western Highlands.

The mansion for ages belonged to the Barons of Swinton, once proprietors of vast estates in the north and west of Scotland. But their ancient possessions melted away, and only this bleak place and a castle on the seaside remain to the last baron of the name. He made this his home, with his only daughter.

Even his right to hold this patrimony undivided was disputed by a distant cousin, who had claims on part of the lands, founded on an ancient mortgage. This cousin took possession of the castle—more than half-ruined—by the sea, several miles westward, and there lived with his household, including retainers who served his fortunes. He maintained his occupancy more by might than right, paid no rent to his kinsman, the inheritor of the title, and was regarded through the whole country as a sort of outlaw, living by practices which the law punished when proven.

Early on a lovely morning in the beginning of June, two figures came out of the stone mansion already mentioned, for a walk on the terrace. The crisp, cool air was delightful, and laden with the fragrance of flowers that bloomed luxuriantly in the little garden on one side of the house. It was the baron's daughter who took charge of this patch, and

the space was always blooming. She herself looked like the moving spirit of the flowers.

She had thrown a plaid over her head, but under it her soft brown ringlets, ruddy with a dash of golden tint, were blown about her face. That face was fresh and charming as the spring. The cheeks had the hue of the wild rose; the features were cast in delicate, aristocratic mold—but a spirit leaped from the blue eyes and asserted itself in the firm, rosy lips, which betokened energy equal to that of the hardest lassie who ever mingled in country toil or sports.

Alicia Maur, indeed, was used to open air and exercise, and to equestrian exploits, and shrunk not from the chase and from wild rides that might have fatigued a peasant maiden. Just now she was bent on one discouraged by her father, and had come out to look at the aspect of the weather.

"It is sure to be clear all day, Margaret," she said, to her companion, a young woman older than herself, and with the hard outline of features peculiar to women of the middle class in that part of Scotland; "and what is to prevent my visit to Lady Vaughan?"

"Your father objected that he cannot go with you; and you know I could not ride so far."



"FOR MY LEDDY," SAID THE LAD, AGAIN BOWING. "FRAE, HIS LORDSHIP," HE ADDED, WITH ANOTHER SCRAPE.

"But Donald can go. He often attends me alone. That is in rides about the moor, or skirting the hills, Alicia. Sir George Vaughan's house is over twenty miles distant."

"A matter of two hours' ride! Oh, I must go! I long for a breath from the sea!"

"Suppose you should meet that wild young Herrick Maur?"

"My cousin Herrick! He would do me no harm! I am not afraid of him!"

"You might well be, Alicia. Did he not intercept you once?"

"Oh, yes!" returned the merry girl, her face dimpling with smiles. "He behaved rudely then. He swore he was in love with me, and would have carried me off to his old battered castle, I verily believe, if he had not been compelled to release me."

"By a gentler cavalier. I have heard about it."

The maiden shot a shy glance at her friend.

"Do you know him?" she asked, while a lovely color suffused her cheeks.

"Lord Cressy? You know I have seen him several times; and I know that he is the son and heir of a wealthy English marquis, who owns a shooting-box—as they call it—among yonder mountains."

"Yes; he chanced to be riding by, and he rescued me from Master Herrick."

"And brought you safely home; and has visited 'Stone Crag' how many times since?" demanded Margaret, archly.

"Stone Crag" was the name given to the baron's seat; so called for a wild and savagely picturesque rock uplifting itself just behind the building.

"Nay, not very often," replied the girl, demurely, blushing yet more deeply. "It was but seemly that my father should thank him for the services rendered to his daughter."

"And it was but natural that the young earl, having eyes, should fall in love with the fair maiden he had rescued."

"Now, Margaret," said Alicia, somewhat haughtily, "you presume too far, indeed!"

"Pardon me, sweet Alicia!" cried the Highland girl, catching her hand impetuously. "You cannot be angry with your foster-sister for but repeating what all the gude wives say."

"Is it so?" asked the baron's daughter. "They have no ground for such gossip."

"Not when the English lord stays so long in his Highland retreat? Not when he rides with the Baron of Swinton, furnishing hounds and horses for the chase? Not when he comes late to sup with him after a day's hunt, and drinks to the health of the bonniest lassie in all Scotland?"

"Oh, fie, Margaret! Scores of gentlemen have done that!"

"But not one of them has gained the lassie's ear, and led her to walks by the Roman well, and sent her flowers day after day—such flowers! raised in hot-houses! gorgeous in bloom, when snow lies on the moor! Ah, my leddy Alicia! well saith the proverb: 'There is aye some water where the stirkie drowns!'"

"Peace, lass, you talk idly! You know well that the father of Lord Cressy would never consent that he should come as a wooer to the daughter of an impoverished baron who can give no dower to his child!"

"I know naught so well as that beauty and bravery are aye fitly mated."

"I bade you hush, girl! I will hear no more. Reginald, Lord Cressy, is nothing to me. See, what is yonder?"

Coming up the hill toward the gate was a young lad of the order called barmen—the hedgers and ditchers of the country. He carried something in one hand, shading his eyes with the other from the light, as he looked up.

"He brings somewhat for you, leddy," observed Margaret.

The young fellow indeed turned when he saw the two figures, and came forward, doffing his cap with an awkward scrape, and presenting what he carried, deprived of the covering of a green bough that had shaded it.

Alicia started when she saw the offering—a basket of the freshest and choicest flowers, far more beautiful than any that grew in the gardens. On the top her own name was arranged in tiny starlike blossoms, breathing exquisite fragrance.

"For my leddy," said the lad, again bowing.

"Fae his lordship," he added, with another scrape.

Margaret laughed, and Alicia blushed crimson as she took the gift.

Bidding her companion give money to the lad, she turned away, and walked to a rustic seat in a little arbor at the end of the terrace.

As she bent her head to inhale the fragrance of the flowers, a tiny, three-cornered note nestling among the snowy petals caught her eye. She glanced timidly round her before she took it up.

It was the first note she had ever received from Lord Cressy. He wrote in haste to say that he had just been summoned to England by news of his father's illness. He was forced to go without the adieu his heart craved from the noble baron and lovely lady to whose kindness he owed so much of the enjoyment of the last few weeks. But he hoped in a short time to return, etc.

There was something in the half-formed language of the note, of meaning that spoke to the young girl's heart; for her eyes were full of tears, and her breast heaved as she read it. Again she glanced around and hid the missive in her bosom, as Margaret approached.

"Did the lad say his lordship had set out already on his journey?" asked Alicia.

"Nay, he said nothing," replied Margaret. "He went back like an arrow from the bow. But here is your father, Alicia."

Alicia rose in some confusion, as a noble-looking man, past middle age, came toward her.

He took no note of the flowers, though she held up the basket; but he observed that something uncommon must have occurred to give that flush to the maiden's cheek, and that air of discomposure.

"What is it, my daughter?" he asked.

Margaret stepped back, for she might not take her place as an equal in the presence of the father of her young foster-sister.

"See these lovely flowers, my dear father! Here is my name on the top, and how prettily it is set in the clustering rose-buds and pink blooms! It beats my garden, quite; especially these fragrant exotics."

The baron looked at the flowers. Very indifferent was he to such trifles.

"They are from Lord Cressy?" he asked. "Why came he not to bring them? I have given him much time of late."

"He is called suddenly to England. His father, the Marquis of Estonbury, is very ill," answered the young girl.

"Ah! sent he that message? By whom?"

With an instant's hesitation, Alicia drew forth the note, and handed it to her father.

He opened and read it.

"Humph! the Marquis of Estonbury is ill!" he muttered. "If he dies Reginald will inherit the title and estates. Has the young man set forth?"

"I cannot tell you, papa. The lad who brought this went back directly. He was a barnman, and had work, belike."

"A strange messenger to a lady!"

"Perhaps the earl had sent away his servants, and was in haste," suggested Alicia.

"I will ride over and see about it."

"Oh, dear father, pray do! It would be but courteous," added the girl, dropping her eyes meekly.

"And I will ride round, as I return, by the Laird of Penrhyn's, and talk with him about that bit of land. Do not expect me home before dusk, Alicia."

"Then, dear papa, I may go and spend the day with Lady Vaughan?"

"Child! it is a long ride for you to take without me."

"Donald will attend me. He is sufficient escort; and you know I have been kept a prisoner by the storms so long!" pleaded the girl. She clasped both hands on the baron's arm and looked beseechingly in his face.

He gazed fondly upon her.

"I am afraid of some danger for you on such a lonely road—" he began.

"Oh, father! what danger could there be?"

"You were molested once."

"But Herrick promised never to offend me so again; and he will keep his word. He is our kinsman, you know."

"Yes, I know that. I have tried to tutor him. I have yearnings toward the lad. He is next heir to the barony, failing myself, for his father will never take my place. I should like to see more of Herrick, if he would break loose from those lawless clansmen of his."

"You know, father, he has had no training in gentle manners."

"I know it well, and I would fain bring him to my own house, and let him see company that better suits his birth and blood than the reckless outlaws he has now for associates. I think there is good in the boy, if he had help to bring it out."

"I am sure there is, father, much good. He would never have been so rude, but—"

"But he was a lover," put in the baron, laughing; "and love with savages is barbarous as the rest of their usages."

"He promised never to molest me again," murmured Alicia.

"He had best not! I should punish such unseemly conduct! Let him come as a man and submit his suit to me! Though I think I would rather see my child the wife of an English nobleman."

"That is not likely, father," interrupted the girl, averting her face. "No such will come to woo a simple country girl."

"The days have been," muttered her father, "when the daughter of a Baron of Swinton might have had earls—ay, dukes at her feet!"

"Time and fortunes are charged."

"The ancient blood is pure, and the nature true as ever!" cried the Scot. "By St. Hierome! if any man could look upon my girl, and not vow her worth the proudest coronet in Britain, with her lovely face and her unstained lineage, he must be a fool!"

"Dear papa, I have a better prospect than the richest coronet! to stay with you all my life!"

"I would I were as my forefathers were—for your sake, child."

"I would not have my own dear papa other than he is!"

Two white arms were clasped around his neck, and a soft kiss was pressed on his bronzed cheek.

"I must go now, my girl," he said, releasing himself.

"And may I go too?" she entreated.

At a nod from her father, Alicia called joyously to Margaret to bid Donald get ready her horse, and prepare himself to accompany her.

She walked back to the house with her father, who gave orders for his own horse to be saddled.

In five minutes Alicia had donned her riding-dress, and her hat with its pretty heron plume, and stood on the porch waiting for Donald to bring up the spirited horse she was used to manage with such admirable skill.

CHAPTER II.

KENNETH'S MISFORTUNE.

"HAUL to, or we shall fire upon you!"

"Fire away!" with a stentorian oath.

This sententious dialogue passed between a revenue cutter manned with brisk-looking chaps in the royal uniform, and the captain of a schooner attempting to run out of the little bay flanked by steep and precipitous rocks.

As the defiant answer came, the cutter shot directly athwart the schooner's bows.

There was a spurt of fire as she ran, severing a rope or two of the schooner; and another that hit the mainmast, scattering a shower of splinters. But the vessel's course was altered too quickly to permit the revenue men to board her and attack the smugglers.

There was more disorderly firing on both sides, with loud shouts and execrations; and the government men seemed to have the worst of it. The schooner had already landed her cargo; and when she was able to free herself from her assailants, she stood out boldly to sea.

A small boat, pulled by a stout pair of hands, rushed out from the shelter of the rocks as the schooner passed the entrance of the little harbor. A single muffled figure sat in the boat, plying the oars with dexterity. As the small craft came alongside the schooner, it was hailed, and a shrill voice instantly replied.

A man rose upon the bulwarks just as a parting shot from the cutter pealed over the water. He was hit; he reeled and swayed on one side as if unable to direct or stay himself; presently falling over the side.

He grasped a loose rope as he fell, and slid down into the water.

The little boat was close beside him in an instant. Two strong arms grasped him by the shoulders, and drew him on board, dipping so much water as this was done that the little craft was near being swamped. But the occupant, now seen to be a woman, as her mantle was flung off, held the form she had rescued with one arm, while she quickly bailed out the boat. Then placing her burden upon the only seat, she applied herself dexterously to stanching the blood from a slight wound in the shoulder, and bathing his temples with cold water.

Consciousness returned in a few moments. When the woman had completed her task by binding a strip of her plaid shawl over the wound, the man sat up, quite himself again.

"I believe I shall be all right shortly," he said. "Thanks to you, Hilda. I was going at first to ask you to hide me somewhere, that I could die in peace." These words were intermingled with curses on the revenue men.

"You shall live, Sir Kenneth, to punish your enemies," answered the woman, eagerly.

The boat had been drifting; but at this juncture she clutched the oars again, and pulled vigorously around the rock projecting from the mouth of the inlet.

The man sunk back on the bench wearily.

"I suppose you haven't the brandy flask with you?" he asked.

His companion shook her head.

"But we'll soon be at the cave," she added.

"I feel strangely weak, for such a scratch. Is the bullet in yet?"

"It passed through. I heard it fall in the water."

"Then all I want is the stimulant. Make all the haste you can, Hilda."

The woman needed no urging. Her arms were stout and sinewy; she was well used to the labor. In the waning light she could now be seen; a tall, muscular figure, with a face that belonged to forty-five years of age, though the wear of toil and exposure made her seem older than she was. Her features were strongly lined, and the complexion, though healthy, was tanned to the loss of whatever beauty it might once have possessed. One feature could not be changed; the eyes, large, full and black, shaded by dark lashes, and overhung by eyebrows as thick and bushy as a man's. Her long black locks had escaped from their fastenings, and streamed wildly over her shoulders, shaken back every minute or two as she plied the oars.

Her companion was an elderly man, with enough of the marks of years and a hard life about him to show that his was no lot of luxury, notwithstanding the title the woman had given in speaking to him.

It was only in courtesy that it was bestowed on him; for Kenneth Maur, though affecting to call himself the head of an ancient house, had no right to do so. He had been an outlaw from his youth, indulging in predatory excursions, yet never being brought under the punishment the law denounced against such offenses. For years past he had aided a company of smugglers, engaged in bringing cargoes of tea, tobacco and spirits from the French coast.

Their confederates had equipped and manned the schooner, while Kenneth took charge of the stores landed and concealed in the cave mentioned, and provided for their transport to market. It was only by chance that he had been aboard the schooner; and Hilda knowing that he wished to land, had gone out to fetch him in the boat, before the scuffle with the revenue-cutter.

Passing a dark mass of rock that jutted frowningly into the water, the boat ran into a little nook, and passed under the projection of a boulder into a space sheltered from outside view. Here was a shelf for landing. When she had helped out her companion, Hilda secured the boat, shoving it behind a pile of rocks where no one could have suspected it lay hidden. Then she turned to Kenneth.

"I had best bring you something from the cave," she said. "You are too weak to climb, methinks."

"Lead on, wench, and I will follow," was the answer.

She parted the screen of bushes, and went upward by a winding path. Kenneth came close be-

hind her, but was compelled now and then to stop and regain his breath, cursing more vehemently the foe whose shot had weakened him, every time he lingered.

About midway up, on the face of the cliff, was the entrance to the cave.

This was the resort of the smugglers, and it was there the stores brought over were deposited, till they could be removed by the landmen in the employ of "the company."

Kenneth seated himself on a stone at the mouth, and leaned against a tree, while Hilda went in; soon returning with a brandy-flask and some food. The wounded man refreshed himself, while she again dressed and bandaged his wound.

Before long he rose, very much strengthened, and motioned to her to lead the way up to the summit of the rocks.

Hilda begged him to repose in the cave for a few hours at least; but he sternly silenced her.

"I will know what these government hounds are after next," he said, growing execrations.

"They know naught of the cave?"

"By good luck, no! and ten to one if they do not go searching the castle for spoil."

"Let them search, then; they will have their labor for their pains."

He uttered a fierce oath.

"Think you, wench, they shall be at liberty to poke their noses into the fox's lair—an' they please? No; we must call the men, and make ready for them."

When they had nearly reached the summit, Kenneth met two of his retainers, whom he dispatched to summon the others, bidding them join him at the castle.

The sun had set when they emerged from the low woods cresting the top of the cliff. Kenneth turned to look seaward.

Diminishing to a speck, the schooner could be seen far off against the red and gold of the west. It was a sight that made the gazer chuckle, for it signaled the present defeat of his foes.

Another and nearer object ere long caught the sight of the chief. The figure of a revenue-officer stood on the cliff to the left, with his telescope to his eyes, watching the vessel.

Kenneth thought of the cave, in the direct range of view. He uttered another low chuckle, and glanced around him, noticing that Hilda had left him. He glided swiftly toward the cliff through the bushes.

A few moments after Hilda was upon a knoll back of the bluff, where she could see the turrets of Castle Maur.

She turned, and was in full view also of the peak on the cliff, where still stood the government officer. She saw Kenneth coming out of the bushes behind him with a stealthy, panther-like tread.

"He is going to be revenged for the shot they gave him!" she cried, in agony. "He will ruin himself! He will ruin us all!"

Swift as an antelope she sped toward the spot.

The man who held the telescope had his figure defined against the red sky.

The cry of warning sprung to Hilda's lips; but she dared not utter it. A struggle on the brow of such a precipice, with the odds of a sturdy frame in full strength against a man wounded—even though slightly—it must result in Kenneth's death or capture!

He was but a step behind his victim. His face was flushed and angry. The telescope was still absorbing the officer's attention.

Hilda glided through the coppice. She was afraid to call out, or even let the rustle of her approach be heard. She ran with breathless speed, hoping she might be in time to catch the rash man's arm, and save him from the consequences of his meditated deed!

She was too late!

Even as she sprung into full view, with noiseless steps, Kenneth had seized the man's arm, intending to drag him back and capture him before he could recover from his surprise. The man struggled as he was jerked back; clutched at his foe, but missed him; shook off his hold as he sprung forward; staggered and fell headlong from the cliff.

Kenneth started backward at the same instant, and Hilda caught his arm. She did not speak, but stood glaring forward, her white face rigid with horror.

"Let go, wench!" the man broke forth, wrenching loose his arm. "You had no business here. Come you with me!"

Hilda was on her knees, peering over the verge.

"He is not dead!" she cried. "He has lodged in a tree rooted between the rocks! I may save him yet!"

"Where go you, Hilda?" questioned the chief, as she rushed past him.

"To save the man if I can! To save you from destruction!" was her exclamation, as she flung her arms up, and plunged into the thicket.

CHAPTER III.

THE CAPTURE.

ALICIA had her pleasant day with Lady Vaughan; but the gentlemen were not at home, and she had the prospect of returning with only Donald's escort. This she did not heed, having perfect confidence in her own horsemanship, and Donald's knowledge of the road homeward. They started long before sunset; but thick clouds on the mountain before them warned them of the approach of a storm; and the young lady decided on turning back for shelter, not caring to encounter the seething rain.

Then Lady Vaughan besought her fair guest to remain for the night. But the girl laughed at the idea of peril, and resisted all entreaties. Her father might be home by ten, and would be uneasy at her stay. And see—the moon was rising, broad, clear,

and bright, scattering the clouds. The road was like a ribbon. She made her adieux, leaped into her saddle and was off, even while the remonstrances of her friend were ringing in her ears.

The rain had passed over, but the wind was high, and bowed the tops of the trees as they rode through the copse on a hillside. Donald rode a little in advance. His young mistress heard him call out "Steady!" as he wheeled round a sudden turn in the road; and then fancied she heard other horse-hoofs that seemed approaching. The moonlight did not penetrate the thick screen of foliage.

Alicia checked her horse, and called to her servant again.

Suddenly the animal she rode gave a quick snort, reared, and then plunged forward. The girl preserved her presence of mind; but she felt the bridle violently jerked from her hand. Her noble horse shied, shivered all over, and then sunk to his knees. His rider was flung from the saddle.

Alicia felt herself in the firm grasp of a pair of arms, but could see nothing save a mass of something dark. She uttered a loud shriek; she called her horse by name, and shouted to Donald.

"Dinna scream again!" growled a harsh voice, "or I maun gag ye! Your steed canna help ye!"

"You have killed him, wretch!" cried the girl; mindful, even in that moment of terror, of the noble brute. "You have killed my brave horse!"

"Nae, he's no slain; he'll do weel enough an ye hauld your tongue. I've dune nae wrang. Should I ha'e let ye fall when the beast reared?"

"If you mean well, help me to get Donald here, and help my horse to rise."

"No—the lad has fled hame; I saw him galloping round the hill."

"Donald! Help! Donald!" the girl shouted.

"Ha'e dune wi' that! The boy is clean gane, I tell ye!"

"I do not believe he would leave me in this manner. You may have murdered him!"

"An' I did naething, but just hit the beast a blow or twa, as he fled past with eyes like a scared owl!" cried the girl's captor, laughing hoarsely.

Alicia wrung her hands in despair.

A groan at a little distance behind her, and the noise of hoofs beating the ground, showed that her wounded horse was striving to rise.

Breaking from the man's hold, she rushed to the spot where the animal, wounded by a knife-thrust in the breast, and weakened by loss of blood, was trying to raise himself upon his fee.

"Oh, Merlin! my brave Merlin!" the girl exclaimed, throwing her arms round his neck; "you are struck; you are hurt! Why did you this wickedness? Merlin had not harmed you!"

"I was fain to quiet him, ma'am. He would have trampled you, if I had not saved you frae his hoofs."

The man evidently wished her to suppose that he had rescued her from danger.

"It is false!" she cried, indignation overpowering her fears. "You are an evil robber! Take all—take my jewels—everything; but help my poor horse!"

"He'll do weel enough! Ye maun come with me, leddy."

Alicia knew not what to do. She was not yet half-way home; she could not go on foot. Her servant had disappeared. She turned to her captor.

"I will give you more than you can find of booty about me, if you will take me to Sir George Vaughan's."

The man shook his head.

"Or to my father's, the Baron of Swinton. He will reward you. But no—that is too far. I could walk to Sir George Vaughan's."

"The leddy canna walk, and the road is rough," returned the savage. "But I will take you to a gentle chief's, not far frae this, and he will mak' ye welcome as the dawn."

"Where?" demanded the bewildered maiden.

"E'en to the noble Sir Kenneth's castle."

"Sir Kenneth?"

"He is called so," said the man. "A noble gentleman is he, and a kinsman of your ain, leddy, if you be the Baron of Swinton's daughter."

"How far is it to the castle?"

"Just three miles and a bittock."

Alicia reflected.

"Is Master Herrick at home?" she asked.

"Ay, surely is he."

Her resolution was taken. She would claim the succor of her kinsman. She bade the man take her thither, and then return without delay to care for her wounded steed, Merlin. This he promised glibly. Then he caught his own horse, which had been browsing the green leaves contentedly during the preceding scene, and lifted the young girl to the saddle.

"I can ride alone," she said, haughtily. "Lead the way."

But her captor leaped with agility to the haunches of the animal, holding the girl fast, and gave the horse a blow in the side that caused him to spring away on a furious gallop.

CHAPTER IV.

AT THE CASTLE.

HILDA made her way to the spot, two-thirds down the rocks, where the revenue-officer had fallen. Standing on a broad ledge, she disengaged his dress from the boughs, and lifted up his head. He was quite insensible.

With all her prodigious strength, she could barely manage to drag him along the ledge to the bushes where the path leading upward began; a blind, zig-zag way, perilous to tread even in daylight, and much more so in darkness, burdened with the body of a wounded or dying man. She could not carry him up, but she made a soft bed of leaves, and laid him down, covering him with her shawl, and

bathing his head and face with water that trickled from a crevice at hand.

Presently a faint moan came from the sufferer, and he moved his arm slightly.

With another effort he raised himself on his elbow, opening his eyes.

"Where am I?" he asked.

Hilda explained that he had fallen from the top of the cliff, and was sorely bruised; but would be better if he would only remain quiet and not attempt to rise.

"Who are you? It is a woman's voice. How came you here to help me?"

"I saw you fall, and ran down the path. You might have been killed, but the branches of a tree broke your fall on the ledge yonder."

"I know; I remember now. A man came up behind and grappled me, and pushed me off."

"You must not talk so!" said the woman, shuddering. "Your foot slipped while you were looking through the telescope."

"Not so; some one clutched me to throw me down. I saw the man—"

"You saw him?" shrieked Hilda, a cold sweat of terror starting out on her face. "For mercy's sake, man, speak! Who could do such a deed?"

"Nay, I know not his name; but I should know him again if I saw him."

"You would know him again?"

"I would surely know him. If you saw me fall, woman, you must have seen him too!"

"No—no—no!" vehemently exclaimed she. "I charge no man wi' such a crime. It would ha'e been murder."

Hilda's motive in succoring the officer was to save her master. It would be believed he meant to kill the man; Kenneth would be sent to prison; in case of the injured man's death, it might bring him to the scaffold!

"Don't trouble yourself wi' such thoughts, man!" she went on, earnestly. "Lie you there, while I go for some one to help carry ye further."

"And a cup of liquor, dame, an you please. I feel very faint."

Hilda muttered to herself as she ran up the ascent. But for the necessity of shielding her chief, she would fain have left the injured man to his fate.

"If he can be got to the hawthorns—the hollow in the rock wi' a stane like a blue whin-stane, he'll be hid frae them that seek him."

She shuddered again.

"They say there's a bluid-stain there, though the water rins o'er it, and has done the same for years bygone. Eugh! but it's cauld, and the north wind whistles amang the brackens."

The barking of a dog was heard. Hilda stopped and whistled.

The next moment a huge animal bounded toward her, leaped up, and greeted her with demonstrations of joy.

"A thousand welcomes, Snath!" she exclaimed; "for I know thy master is near, and I want him sorely."

"Who wants me?" repeated a gruff voice, and the form of a tall man was dimly descried, coming down the rocks.

"Oh, Matlin, is it you? Speak!"

"Who else should it be—and who are you? It is a woman's voice."

"I am Hilda, the housekeeper."

"Hilda! And what do you here?"

"Know you not, Matlin, seer as you are? What else brought you, just at the moment succor is most needed?"

"Succor? Are you in peril, Dame Hilda?"

"Not me! Surely you know?"

"I know nothing; I am blind to-night. Or my sense is stunned!"

As he came near, the woman grasped his arm.

"Come with me, on the instant."

She led the way down by the winding path among the rocks.

"Where are you going?" demanded the man.

"That I should have to tell a seer like you, Mat! Knew ye naught of the chief in dea'ly peril?"

"The chief—Kenneth? Why, I spoke with him going toward the castle."

"My tongue be palsied for what I was about to say! Is it for me to betray him?" muttered the woman. "Nae—nae! It's not the chief, but one of the men that sought him. He fell frae the cliff, and needs help! I could not carry him up to the hollow."

Thus answering Matlin's questionings, she led the way to the spot where the hurt stranger lay. He gave a faint moan as he heard them, but answered them not in words. He had been trying to rise upon his feet, and the effort had utterly exhausted him.

Matlin lifted him as easily as if he had been an infant, and prepared to reascend the rocks. The dog sniffed and growled; but the bidding of his master silenced him; and the woman urged the necessity of allowing none to know what had happened, lest suspicion should be drawn upon themselves.

They reached the dell; but there was no shelter for the wounded man, and Matlin said he must be taken to his hut by the larches. This would take time. With repeated injunctions to silence, Hilda took her leave, to return to the castle.

The castle, meanwhile, was the scene of merriment, mingled with fierce defiance and blustering threats.

Kenneth Maur, a powerfully-built, stern-looking man, with shaggy beard and bushy gray hair, sat at the head of the table after the evening meal had been dispatched, with a huge flagon of wine before him. Several of his kinsmen and retainers still occupied their seats, and many were drinking while they talked.

Contradictory rumors had come in, concerning the movements or intentions of the government men. Some said they had departed quietly; some that the cutter was lying in the cove, ready on the morrow to reconnoiter the coast. Others said that they had sent for a reinforcement of soldiers, and were going to search the castle for the smugglers' stores.

At every suggestion Kenneth would laugh hoarsely, and say the varlets had better present themselves at his gates; he would give them a welcome from his guns, etc. He lifted the flagon to his lips and took a mighty draught after every speech; and while the latter was applauded, the first was imitated by his followers.

The door was pushed open and a young man came in. He was about twenty-two years of age, though his broad and stout frame might have made him appear much older, but for his youthful face and fresh complexion. He had bushy yellow hair and blue eyes; and a long, tawny mustache partly concealed his mouth. He would have been called handsome even in refined society. He was attired in a full suit of dark green cloth with leather breeches and heavy boots, and wore a slouched hat, which he lifted, or rather swept from his head, as he came in, dragging a heavy carbine in his left hand.

"So, you are here at last, Herrick, my son," was his greeting from the chief. "Make room, there! A seat for you at my right hand; your place, boy! More wine!"

But Herrick declined both the wine and the place at table. He stood his carbine in a corner, looked around gloomily upon the rest, and then sunk into a leathern chair by the huge chimney, in which green fragrant bushes occupied the place of logs that in winter made the great baronial hall warm for the revelers.

In answer to his father's history of what had occurred, and demands for his aid in maintaining their independence, the young man said, with a slight provincial accent:

"I have heard of all this. Will ye have my counsel, or do ye condemn it, father?"

"Speak freely, boy; I bid ye."

"Then my counsel is—that you throw open the castle to their search."

"What! admit the government men under this roof in peace on such an errand?"

"Why not? You have no war with the government, and they will find nothing here."

"But they shall not come here—to put shame upon us as sneaks and cowards!"

Kenneth's words evoked a muttered assent from his followers around the table.

"It is not cowardly to avoid needless blood-shedding, or even strife," said the young man.

"And where learned ye submission?" growled Kenneth, scowling at his son. "Ye would make loyal slaves of us all. Belike this comes of your visits to our comely cousin, the Baron of Swinton!"

"I am not favored there!" muttered Herrick.

"And I care not."

"Show yourself a man, then!" shouted the chief; "loyal to your clan and your ain house! Who counsels submission is a traitor!"

Young Herrick started to his feet.

"Who calls me traitor?" he fiercely demanded.

"None here," answered one of his cousins, brusquely. "The chief but said he who would take a slave's treatment at the hands of our foes is so; and he is right. The spies shall not enter the castle. We will fight to prevent it."

"And I will not fight at any bidding!" cried Herrick, advancing to the table, and glaring at the others, who drew back as if in scorn as he approached.

The burst of laughter and mutterings of "craven," violently irritated the young man. He seized a stone pitcher, and was about to hurl it at one of the men, when his arm was clutched by Gregory, the first speaker.

At the same instant one of the trusted retainers of Kenneth entered hastily, and whispered in the ear of his chief.

"It is well, Bertram," Kenneth replied. "Go and call Hilda; she will receive our visitor."

The man bowed low, and withdrew.

"Sit down, rash boy," said the chief to his son. "Let me hear nae mair of this unseemly violence. Since you have refused to aid us with the strength of your arm, will ye marry to better the fortunes of your house?"

"I know not what you mean," grumbled the youth.

"I am not dark of speech! I say, will ye lead a fair bride to the altar at my bidding?"

"That depends on whether she pleaseth me or pleaseth me not," was the undutiful response.

"Suppose I asked you to wed your fair cousin, Mistress Alicia Maur?"

A deep flush swept over Herrick's face, and he turned it away for an instant.

"He scorns women!" cried Gregory, derisively.

The others laughed.

Herrick echoed the mirth in bitter mockery. Then he turned to his father.

"You have more pluck than power!" he said.

"That fair cousin would laugh to scorn your suit or mine!"

"Suppose I was sure of her consent?"

"But that canna be. Think ye the proud baron—her father—with his English associates, would listen to a loon like Herrick Maur?"

"Are you not next heir to the title, failing son of his?"

"What of that? It is an empty title; or carries little land wi' it."

"Little land, but muckle state! A baron of Swin-

ton may hold his ain wi' England's proudest peers! And his daughter is fairest among the fair!"

"We a' ken that!" cried Gregory. "Here's to her health!" A dozen cups were lifted to drain the wine.

"Be silent!" exclaimed Herrick, impatiently. "I ask again, what means all this?"

"It means, boy, that I can bestow your cousin, if ye are minded to wed her; ay, this very night!"

"Nay—'tis ill jesting, when the speech is of a fair maiden."

"It is nae jest. Ye shall wed her within the hour, if ye will."

"If she wills, I am willing enough," said the young man. "But—"

"Let the minister be called—" began the chief.

He was interrupted.

The great bell of the castle—the bell that was never heard unless danger threatened, or a chief of the house was dead—swung out its slow and solemn peal!

CHAPTER V.

THE SEER'S WARNING.

ALL the men started to their feet.

"What does this mean?" exclaimed Kenneth.

The front door was thrown open, and a figure of aspect familiar to all passed over the threshold. It was that of a tall, stalwart-looking man, wrapped in a dark mantle, with flowing white beard and abundant white locks rolling down over his neck. His eyebrows were jet-black, and under them were deep-set, dusky eyes, now fixed, as if gazing on vacancy. There was a rapt expression in the face, and its pallor was more than natural. One hand clutched the mantle; the right was extended, and lifted upward.

"It is Matlin, the seer!" ran in a hoarse whisper from man to man among the revelers.

"It is the seer, and the vision is upon him!" exclaimed Gregory.

Our readers need hardly be informed that the old Scottish superstition of second-sight yet lingered among the clans in the mountains. The seer, gifted from his birth with the faculty of seeing events before they came to pass, especially those that concerned his own people, was still listened to with reverence. His prophecies often determined the counsels of the chiefs, and he was regarded by the common people as a mysterious being to whom the secrets of nature were open, and whose eyes, enlightened supernaturally, could discern what was hidden from all other sight.

It will be remembered that Hilda, when she met the seer among the rocks, deemed that he had been supernaturally informed of the occurrence, and that he had come purposely to give aid to the injured revenue-officer. Hence her surprise at learning that he knew nothing.

The great bell still boomed out its sullen alarm.

"Listen!" said the seer, taking a step forward.

"It is the death-peal of more than one among you who have drained the cup of feasting."

"Matlin!" exclaimed Kenneth, in a tone of grave displeasure.

But Matlin paid no heed.

"I ha'e seen your wild doings," again said the seer, "and now the doom is revealed—the vengeance that is coming! The foe is at hand! Your castle will be attacked this night!"

"Silence!" shouted the chief. "How dare you come among us with your bodings of evil? Sit you here, and speak like a true man, or begone this instant!"

The seer turned to face him.

"Kenneth Maur!" he said, in a slow and measured speech. "Is there not blood upon your hands?"

The chief burst into coarse laughter.

"An ye list to spin nursery tales," he cried, "let it be in the women's hearing! Away with him to the kitchen, or the housekeeper's still-room."

No one stirred. Matlin heeded not the anger his words had provoked.

"The man you fought with on the cliff," he continued, "lies in peril of death; and his blood that stains your footsteps will lure on the hounds in pursuit. Be wise, and turn them away before their fangs are in your throat!"

There was a confused murmur among the guests, and Herrick strode up to the seer, but did not attempt to interrupt him.

"Take the warning given," his solemn speech went on. "Leave the castle to the soldiers who are marching on it, and will soon be here. My hut by the larches is a shelter large enough, and to-morrow you may return hither in peace."

"Who dares counsel flight to Kenneth Maur?" demanded the chief, threateningly. "By the bones of my father, if he were other than the seer, I would hew him in pieces here in our hall!" And he clutched his heavy sword, half-drawing it. "Before he provokes me beyond bearing, away with him! He may prate of his false visions beside the kitchen-logs. Begone with him! Gregory, do ye not obey me?"

Gregory laid hold of the seer, but speedily released him. The dog, Snath, had followed his master and had lain crouched at his feet while he was speaking.

At the touch of violence laid upon him he sprang up fiercely, and rushed upon Gregory, who fell back with an execration.

Herrick stepped between them.

"The dog will not harm me," he said, as he laid his hand caressingly on the animal's head. Snath welcomed the caress by wagging his tail, and went back to crouch at his master's feet.

Then there was a noise outside as of many voices and footsteps. The door was again flung open, and two or three men came hurrying in with their

tidings. The alarm had been given that the reinforcement of soldiery had received orders to march on the castle, demand its surrender for their occupancy till the search could be made next day, and arrest all who opposed them!

The sound of the great bell had summoned all who would defend the chief from their dwellings in the neighborhood; but they could not outnumber the soldiers. The troop was on the march, and the storm that was rising would make them more fierce to obtain shelter. Was it to be peace or a struggle?"

The seer, Matlin, had sunk upon a seat, burying his face in his hands. The vision had passed. It had left him, as usual, with trembling frame and collapsed strength. Herrick noticed his condition. He filled a cup with wine, and put it to his lips. Matlin drained it, and thanked him with a grateful look.

With loud execrations, Kenneth vowed he would give the assailants the reception they deserved. He ordered Matlin taken away.

"Put him in one of the east store-rooms," he cried; "and since he came to bring news of disaster, and counsel submission, let him share the danger he predicted. Out with him, Gregory, and leave him a prisoner. In the largest room! There is not a window for his escape, but he can hear all that passes within."

Gregory took the old man's arm, and led him to one of the side doors, followed by the dog.

"Nay, this violence shall not be!" cried young Herrick. "Matlin is a faithful friend. He came when the vision was on him, to warn you, father, and by my sword, his counsel was wise and good! You shall not harm a hair of his head!"

"Who wants to harm him—foolish boy?" shouted his father. "He shall but abide his own prophecy. If the castle falls, we fall with it! An ye dare meddle with my orders, I'll gi'e ye work to do. Gregory, obey me!"

He strode to the side door, out of which Gregory led his prisoner, and whispered to him as he passed out. Then he resumed his directions to his followers.

"Place the cannon on the ramparts, and dispose the men at the windows to fling down the ladders if they raise any. Have the guns and crowbars out of the armory!"

His men hastened away in different directions in seeming readiness to obey. But the utmost confusion prevailed. The bell was silent, but the storm was raging without, and the dash of sea-waves against the rocks below was like the roar of distant artillery.

Once more Herrick, ignorant of his father's reason for dreading arrest—and that he was willing to risk all their lives rather than be captured, when death by the hangman might be his doom—interfered to prevent this mad resistance to the civil authorities.

"I said ye should have other work than meddling with us, craven boy!" cried his father, tauntingly. "And so you shall! Look there!"

He pointed to the open side door.

There stood Alicia Maur, with white, scared face, looking at them.

Beside her stood Hilda, the housekeeper, and on the other side Gregory, who had led the maiden into the hall.

She wore her riding-habit of dark-green velvet, trimmed with gold lace, and a green hat with its drooping heron's feather. White leathern gloves covered her hands. Just as Bertram had received her from her captor's hands, her dress disordered and her ringlets pulled over her cheeks and neck, she stood there, a radiant vision of beauty—all terrified and bewildered as she was—beholding the strange scene.

It was a minute before Herrick could speak; and while he stood petrified with surprise, Hilda glided to the chief, and grasped his arm.

"Where is Matlin?" she whispered, eagerly.

"Away, woman! I want not your help!"

"He had charge of the officer! the man who fell frae the cliff!" she gasped, convulsively pressing Kenneth's arm. "The man will die for lack of aid!"

"Is he not dead already?" demanded the chief.

"He was saved by a miracle; but he is sorely hurt. Send Matlin to him; he hath a leech's skill. Oh, Sir Kenneth! if the man dies—woe to you! woe to us all!"

"This way!" said Kenneth, crossing the hall with her. His belief in the death of the officer, and that he was in danger of arrest, had made him so reckless in resolving to defend the castle. The news brought by Hilda put a new face on the matter.

The brief dialogue and movement occupied but a moment, ere they went out followed by several others.

Herrick approached the young girl, and ordered Gregory to leave them. The man scowled wrathfully, but he obeyed.

The scared look had not left Alicia's face. The young man gently led her to a chair.

"I know nothing of this," he muttered. "When you are recovered, lady, you will tell me how you came here."

The frightened girl looked wildly around her; then piteously at Herrick, clasping her hands.

"Oh, Herrick!" she sobbed. "You are our kinsman! You will save me! You will save me!"

CHAPTER VI.

THE PRICE OF LIBERTY.

Kenneth and the housekeeper, with two of his followers, proceeded at once to the room to which Matlin had been taken as a prisoner.

It was a large apartment, used for lumber and household stores, and bare of furniture. The win-

dows were narrow slits, high up in the stone wall; there was but one door, and that had been securely locked by the chief's orders.

The ponderous key was produced, and the door was thrown open. Kenneth snatched the torch from one of his men and went in.

He flashed the light to and fro, till every portion of the room was brought into view.

It was entirely empty!

"He was not brought here," said the chief, angrily.

"He was brought here; I can swear to it," said one of the men; "to this very room."

"I saw him put in," added Hilda, "and the door fast locked outside."

"But, woman, you see for yourself he's not here," testily growled the chief.

"And he could not have gotten forth," added the dame, embarrassed what to think.

"Search the other rooms," thundered Kenneth, in a rage at the disappearance of the prisoner he came to liberate.

Not a trace of the seer could be found in any of the rooms. The wonder was great, and several avowed their belief that Mat was a wizard.

"How else could he go forth?" suggested Hilda, "w' ne'er a window to put his head through!"

The confusion in the castle and around it left no time for conjecture or questioning. The soldiers were outside; and they had demanded admittance in the king's name.

Gregory, who was spokesman in the absence of Kenneth, responded by requiring to know what had brought them at that hour to invade the dwelling of a man who had given no cause for a show of violence against him.

The leading officer of the troops rode within speech of Gregory, who stood upon one of the balconies. He said he and his men had been summoned and sent to the assistance of the revenue men, who had reported the capture of their commander. He had been missing since before dusk, and was supposed to be held a prisoner in the castle. He must be instantly released, or the attack would be made to force an entrance and deliver the captive.

Kenneth came forward at this juncture, and loudly declared that no prisoner was held within the castle; and that no enemy should be admitted to search.

There was a stunning clamor of voices at this; the soldiers shouting that they did not believe him, and calling their comrades to the rescue; the adherents of Kenneth giving orders, and running to and fro in wild disorder. The chief's orders to bolt and barricade the entrances were obeyed, and preparations were hurriedly made to resist the attack. In vain some of the men urged that the soldiers be permitted to make the search and then retire; it was answered that they claimed the right also to quarter themselves all night, and make a search for smuggled stores on the morrow, perhaps to arrest the whole household as suspected participants. There was no limit to the freedom claimed by a body of soldiers in possession; and a man's own house was his stronghold.

In the midst of the wild disorder Hilda made her way to Kenneth, and laid hold of his arm. He turned quickly; the woman's face was white as death, and her lips trembled; she had some evil news to communicate. She gasped, almost breathless, in her master's ear:

"He is dying; he will be dead ere dawn; save yourself!"

"Speak plainly, woman, or else stand aside!" was the hasty response.

"The lad, Malcolm—he came from Mat, the seer—"

"What of him? Has the devil carried him off? Why canna ye speak out?"

"The man who fell frae the cliff; Mat took him home. He is hurt to the death. 'Twill sune be known, if 'tis not a'ready! Master, master, save yourself! Leave the castle! the storm is 'bating; I will pull the boat round, and fetch ye wi' the dawn; ye can hide in the cave! There is a vessel nigh the coast at anchor."

She poured forth her entreaties with frenzied earnestness; and Kenneth saw at once the danger in which he stood. His stubborn will, however, forbade him to yield.

"I will not fly, nor hide, this night!" he cried, hoarsely. "I will hold the castle till dawn, and then baffle them! Where is Herrick?"

Hilda wrung her hands in terror and anguish. Better than life she loved her master, and to find him so foolhardily tortured her.

"Herrick! I will find him! He may persuade ye, Sir Kenneth! Wae is me, he heeds not words of mine!"

Turning, she sped from the place in search of help, but staggered against the wall in horror at the next sound that met her ears.

With his own hands Kenneth lighted the fusee of the cannon on his ramparts. The roar shook the castle, and though no harm resulted among the besiegers, the formidable sound created a panic, showing that their purpose would not be accomplished without bloodshed and loss of life. The silence that ensued was speedily followed by greater activity and a wilder uproar than ever among both the hostile parties.

Return we to the terrified Alicia. She heard the clamor, the shouting, and the dire confusion, wilder than the storm and the roar of the sea. It seemed as if the old castle were tumbling about her ears. She had sunk on her knees, and held her clasped hands toward Herrick in agonized supplication. He stood irresolute and agitated by conflicting emotions. He knew his duty called him to share the labor and peril of his father and kinsmen, rash and misguided as he deemed them. Yet how could he leave the fair girl thus imploring his help? Had not his father, too, committed her to his charge?

"You will save me, Herrick?" entreated the maiden.

"What can I do?" stammered the youth.

"Take me home! Oh, take me to my father! I was mad to leave home! I was headstrong. Oh, Herrick, take me back, and I will bless your name forever!"

Turning abruptly, the young man went to the door. He found it fastened on the outside. He beat violently upon it, and shouted the names of several retainers.

A voice answered him without:

"The castle is attacked by soldiers. Every man is wanted on the ramparts!"

"Undo the door! Which of you dared bolt me in? Call Hilda. Send Hilda hither!" he shouted.

"Oh, Herrick, take me away! I shall die if I stay here!" shrieked the poor girl, more and more alarmed every instant.

Herrick took her hand and led her to the extreme end of the hall. There stood a massive cask full of liquor; from which at meals the men were accustomed to draw full flagons. With a giant's strength the young man hurled this cask, larger and heavier than a hogshead, on one side. It had stood directly over a trap-door. Herrick stooped and pulling an iron ring lifted this, disclosing a narrow flight of stone steps. A rush of cold damp air came from the opening.

"Behold the secret passage," he said. "It leads by a winding way to a door that opens outside the walls. You can go that way; take this torch to guide your steps. You will find the outer door unbarred; it is always kept so. When you are outside nothing will hinder your flight."

He put the torch into Alicia's hand; he led her to the steps down which she was to go. Alicia looked up at him. He was struggling violently with emotion; his right hand was clenched; his teeth were set as in terrible determination.

"And you—what will you do?" asked the girl.

"I? Oh, I will shut the trap-door, and replace the cask to conceal your flight. Then I will batter down yon door, and go out to help my kinsmen, and die in defense of the castle."

Alicia's feet were already on the grimy steps of the passage. She shivered violently.

"I cannot go alone!" she said. "Come you with me!"

"How can I leave the castle when foes are besieging it?"

"Your father put me in your care, and locked the door upon us. He does not want you. He would send, if he did. I dare not go alone! Come, Herrick—my cousin—come!"

"What can harm you, alone? The storm is over the country is quiet. All the fighting-men are here!"

"I should not know the way to my home, and it is far!" moaned the girl, sobbing in terror.

"At the nearest farm-house you will find shelter, rest, and a guide and horse when you list to pursue the journey. Here is money; all the boors are easily bribed."

He offered a purse, which the girl refused to take.

"If you will not go with me," she murmured, "I shall die in this underground passage! It frightens me but to look at it! I shall never come forth alive! And you will perish, too, Herrick! You must come with me!"

She stood on the topmost step and clasped his arm with her white hand looking beseechingly in his face.

"Do you care for me Alicia?" he asked earnestly.

"Surely I do," she answered. "You are my only friend, Herrick!"

"What will you do for me, Alicia, if for your sake I desert my father in his hour of need?"

"Take me to my father, and he will send you help. He will serve you in all things."

"What will you do for me?"

"I will bless you. Oh, Herrick! I will call you my deliverer!"

"Will you love me, Alicia?"

"I do love you, cousin."

"But not as I love you! You have long known—you must have known—how madly I worship you! I would give the world, my life—my honor even—to call you mine! Do not start; my father sent to capture you for the purpose of making you my wife—ay, this night! But I would have no constraint; you shall be free to choose. I might compel you to wed me, but I love you too well for that, Alicia!"

"Oh, Herrick! you have a noble soul!"

"Hear me now," cried the young man, impetuously. "I am ready to go with you, to forsake all; to brand myself as a traitor; to take you to your father's house! But you must promise to be my wife! Will you promise that, Alicia?"

"Herrick, you have too grand a soul to profit by my sore strait! Be generous—I implore you!"

"Then you love me not! You scorn my suit, proud girl!"

"I do not scorn—I honor you. I am lost unless you save me! I appeal to your mercy."

"Shall I save you for another suitor?"

His eyes glared; his lips were drawn; his face was white as death.

"You must answer me before I stir, girl," he gasped, releasing his arm from her feeble hold.

"You want me to save you—that you may wed another!"

"Oh, no, no, no! Herrick!"

"Will you swear to marry me?"

"Oh, I cannot!"

"Will you swear to marry no one else?"

"Mercy, mercy, Herrick!"

"By my ancestors, you shall swear, or I leave you to perish! Hark to those wild shouts! Our men have triumphed! They will be in here presently! What will become of you?"

"Save me! Save me!"

"Will you swear to marry no man unless I give you leave?"

"I will! I will!"

"Swear then! by this sword! No, by your hopes of heaven!"

"I swear!" repeated the affrighted girl, falling on her knees.

"I have your oath!" cried Herrick, exultingly.

"You shall wed me, or no man! Now come!"

He threw one arm around her waist. The cries without were redoubled; but unheeding them, he lifted her down the steps, closed the trap-door after them and bolted it on the lower side.

Carrying the torch in one hand, and clasping the almost-fainting maiden firmly with the other, he gained the passage, and sped on swiftly, till the door beyond was reached. This he flung open with some exertion of strength, and they stood in the open air, outside.

A terrible scene burst on Herrick's sight, amid the clamor and shouting. Flames were rushing from the upper windows of the castle.

CHAPTER VII.

FATHER OBEYING SON.

WITH an exclamation of bitter self-reproach, Herrick struck his forehead. He had abandoned his father and his kinsmen to such a fate!

"I must go!" he cried, hoarsely. "I must go—to die with them!"

"Herrick!" the girl shrieked, in terror.

"Look yonder!" he exclaimed. "The castle is on fire! My father has rushed on destruction—but I must perish with him!"

"You shall not go, to perish!" replied Alicia.

"Your kinsmen will escape. Take me to my father, and he will come with men to their help!"

"I must leave you at once, Alicia. I have been a traitor for love of you!"

"The soldiers will capture or kill you!"

"I will not care, girl. You will be safe!"

"How can I be, without your help? I dare not take a step forward, in this darkness! Herrick, you will not be so cruel as to leave me?"

Voices were heard at that moment, and approaching steps. There was the gleam of a torch. Alicia suppressed a scream, and clung to her cousin.

Then there was a swift rustling among bushes near, and a dog sprung on the young man with a whine of recognition.

"Down, Snath! Where is your master?"

"I am here, lad!" answered the deep voice of Matlin, the seer, and, torch in hand, he came close to them.

We may as well inform the reader how the seer made his escape from the strong room where he had been imprisoned by the chief's orders.

The windows were too narrow for egress; but the wide chimney was open; and Mat was used to climbing; and the dog too with his aid. Once on the top and outside the chimney, their descent was effected by means of the tall poplars. It needed out a leap to clutch their branches. Matlin was safe and in freedom while the master was searching for him.

Herrick knew nothing of this. But he was overjoyed to behold the seer. He bade him take charge of his lady cousin, while he went back to the castle.

"Nay, boy, ye may see for yoursel' the danger is past. The fire is nearly put out."

He pointed to the windows, now utterly dark, from clouds of rolling smoke.

"An' hear ye na the music of the soldiers on the return?"

"But my father—"

"If he is wise, he will leave the castle. I sent him warning. If he linger till daylight, 'twill be waur for him."

"How is that?"

"The officer he wounded is like to die."

"He wounded an officer?"

"Ay, of the revenue men. Sir Kenneth sought to capture him, and he fell frae the cliff. If he dies, there will be murder to be answered for."

Herrick stood a moment in a stupor of horror.

"I must go to him at once!" he cried.

"Na—ye will hardly find him. Hilda has warned him to flee."

"But he will not; he is foolhardy. Here, take you the girl, and I will speed to him. You shall hear from me anon."

"Come to my hut by the road. Ye'll find us there."

"Go, Alicia; you are safe with Mat. I will return."

He placed her beside the seer, and in a moment was lost to sight among the trees.

"Come, lady," said the old man. "Snath and I will guard you safely!"

Alicia was weeping softly.

"Oh, my father!" she sobbed. "How he will suffer this night."

She clung to Mat's arm and went with him, the dog bounding on before them.

Even as the two fugitives bolted the trap-door behind them, the other door was thrown open, and Hilda rushed in. She was in search of Herrick, to help her in persuading his father to instant flight.

A single glance sufficed to show her the way of escape they had taken.

With a shriek of discovery she ran to her master, and drew him into the hall. But no entreaties could avail to induce him to take to the secret passage. He denounced Herrick as a traitor; he upbraided him for cowardly flight when the foe was upon them; he swore that he would die at the head of his household before he would surrender or escape.

Hilda ran to and fro in her despair. Then the flames burst out above; and in a new alarm, all the men were called to extinguish them and prevent the entrance of the besiegers in the confusion.

The fire was subdued. The besiegers were ordered to draw back, and a number retired toward the village. The main force still commanded the gates, so that none could issue without being intercepted.

It was determined to wait till dawn before prosecuting their search. Gregory, second in command of Kenneth's men, had a parley with the leader, and pledged his word that no opposition should be made at daylight to a peaceable search.

Thus some degree of quiet was restored before Herrick found his way back. Finding he could not enter by the great door without danger of arrest by the soldiers, he took the underground passage again, unbolted the trap, and got into the great hall, to find it dark and silent. He rushed through the different rooms in search of his father.

The first he met was Gregory, who demanded an explanation of his absence. To him the youth refused to give it. But when Kenneth reproached him, he told him of the young girl he had placed in his charge, and his imperative duty to secure her safety before returning, as he now did, to share the fate of his kindred.

"And where is the girl?" demanded Kenneth. You have let her slip through your fingers, after all my pains?"

"She is safe; cared for by the seer."

"Matlin! Hath the devil brought him back? How got he forth from the castle?"

"Nay, I know not. I met him near the copse, and I bade him take care of the girl."

"You are a fool! She will escape ye! Ye should have wedded her the night."

"Nay, we are troth-plighted!"

"Say ye so? Then gi'e us your hand, boy. Such a bride will bring ye dower to gild the barony, when her father dies."

"I know nothing of that; nor do I care. I love the girl and mean to marry her. But, my father, you cannot stay here to abide the search that will be made the morn."

"Nae, that he canna; I ha'e told him so," put in Hilda, eagerly. She had just joined the group.

"And why not?" asked the chief.

"Because," whispered Herrick, leaning to his ear, "because it will then be known that the officer they deem a captive is not here, but lies dead at the hut of Matlin the seer."

"Lies dead!" Kenneth's pale lips echoed.

"Surely; and you must be far from this coast; for it will be known that he met his death at your hand," urged the son.

Hilda and Gregory joined their entreaties.

"The vessel is off the coast; you can be on board before the dawn. It is your only means of escape. If they arrest you—" pleaded Herrick.

"And you, boy? and you?" the chief questioned—glancing from his son to Gregory.

"I will bide in the castle," answered the latter.

"You will go—with your betrothed—to the Baron of Swinton?" asked Kenneth of his son.

"Aye, or anywhere," he answered, moodily.

"Ye maun gae there!" cried Hilda. "Wi' the fair damsel to speak for ye—"

"I want no one to speak for me!" was the young man's rejoinder.

"Weel—weel—I'll be content, so ye are wi' the maiden, and I'll wish ye joy o' your wedding when I come back!" laughed the chief.

He then prepared for flight. Hilda had already prepared the necessities of food and clothing, and two of the men were waiting to carry them. Gregory promised to fulfill every command to the letter; to keep the men at the castle, and to communicate with the chief from time to time at the sea-coast town in France where he was to fix his residence. Herrick took leave of his father, who would not hear of his going with him, and promised to return to his fair cousin, the instant he departed.

No one but Hilda and the two servants, Kenneth said, should go with him to the beach, for fear of exciting the suspicions of prowling soldiers.

They went by the secret passage, and Herrick, with Gregory's help, replaced the cask. No one would have suspected the existence of an opening beneath it.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE NEW GUEST.

HERRICK found a way out of the castle by a door in the rear, and eluded the vigilance of the party of soldiers on the watch. The moon was set, and the night was very dark. He went round to reconnoiter the force, before leaving the vicinity of the castle.

At the road leading to the dell he met Hilda returning; and from her he learned that his father had already embarked. He questioned her closely respecting the occurrence on the cliff, and cautioned her against speaking of the matter; a caution quite unnecessary. It was through Matlin's revelations in "the vision" that anything had become known to Kenneth's friends.

Then the young man turned his steps to the woody ravine where stood the seer's dwelling.

There was firelight glimmering from the windows of the hut; but all was silent. Not even the dog was to be heard, keen as he was to note the approach of a visitor. Herrick lifted the latch softly and entered.

The outer room, or kitchen, was untenanted. He passed on to an interior room, the door of which stood open.

Alicia sat beside a couch, on which lay the form of a man. She was bending over the white face and wiping the forehead with a cloth. Hearing footsteps, she hastily turned, sprung up, and gave a little cry of surprise.

"Alicia!" said the young man, "how is it that you are alone here? Where is Matlin?"

She glanced at the man on the bed, and led the way into the other room before she answered.

"Matlin is gone to Sir George Vaughan's. I entreated him. I must not stay here, you know. Sir George or Lady Vaughan will send for me."

"Why send there for aid?"

"It is too far to Stone Crag."

"Did I not promise you to return, and take you thither?"

"But I knew not when, Herrick, and the time seems long; oh, very long."

"Who is in yon room?"

"A man sick—wounded—nigh unto death."

"His name, girl?"

"I do not know it. Matlin said he had brought him hither for nursing and medicines. He is too ill to know any one; and I have been doing what I could to soothe his pain."

Herrick went back into the room and bent over the sleeper, examining his clothes.

"It is the same, I verily believe," he muttered. "The man who was bruised by—the fall from the cliff—as Hilda said."

"Yes, it is the same," replied the girl, who had followed her cousin.

Herrick uttered an exclamation of intense thankfulness.

"He is not dead."

"No, surely not."

"They said he was lying dead. The knaves! Will he live? Will he recover?"

"How can I tell? I have sat by him an hour, and still he slumbers."

The young man felt the pulse, and placed his hand on the chest. The beats were feeble, but regular, and often labored. Beads of sweat stood on the marble forehead, and Alicia again wiped them off.

"He has had an opiate?" said Herrick.

"The seer gave him a draught to ease his pain. When he wakes, I am to give him a teaspoonful of this," and she took a vial from the table.

"He must have another leech. I will go for one. He must not die."

There was a sound of voices without, the barking of a dog, and the tramping of horses.

Alicia started up in wild affright.

"Oh, Herrick, if those should be enemies! Mat has had no time to reach Sir George's house! Hide me! Shield me!"

She clung to her cousin in mortal fear.

"It is Snath's bark!" he answered. "Matlin is here!"

The seer's cheery voice was indeed heard mingled with others, as the outsiders came nearer. One voice more impatient than the others struck on the maiden's ear.

"My father!" she shrieked, rushing forward into the arms of the foremost of the new-comers.

"My child! My own Alicia!" cried the Baron of Swinton, clasping his recovered daughter to his breast, with tears of joy.

Matlin, and two or three men who had come with the baron, entered at the same moment.

"How came you hither so soon, dear papa?" asked Alicia, trembling with emotion, and clasping her father's hand in both her own.

"How did you find me?"

"Donald came home in wretched case, and frightened well-nigh to death, my child, with news of your capture, and the slaying of your horse, by an armed soldier at the head of a force."

"Oh, father! there was but one; he wounded my brave Merlin, and carried me off."

"Donald was a cowardly slave, to let you be captured, and seek his own safety. He lies in the dungeon for it! It took not many minutes, as you may guess, to mount and scour the country in search of you. We thought, from the craven's talk of armed men, that a party of lawless soldiers had taken my daughter. We rode on to Vaughan's, and he has a party in search also. We have scoured the coast, and were making for the castle, to see if aught had been heard by Kenneth's people, when we fell in with this worthy man, who brought such news as gave new life to my old heart! It would have died within me if I had lost ye, my daughter."

The girl's white arms went round her father's neck, while she briefly narrated her adventure, and reception at the castle. She made no mention of aught but kindness. The castle was besieged by soldiers, and she had been wofully terrified; but her cousin Herrick had saved her; had brought her forth in safety; and given her in charge to the seer, who brought her to his hut, and had gone for help at his entreaty. The baron acknowledged the kindness of both Matlin and Herrick, by grasping the hand of each, and thanking them.

"And you have no chiding for your wayward daughter," she murmured, "whose obstinate self-will brought this trouble upon you, dear papa?"

"I shall not trust her from my sight in future!" the father exclaimed.

Then he gave orders to his attendants to see to their horses.

"My brave Merlin!" cried Alicia. "No one has seen to him! He was wounded by the ruffian who seized me."

She described the road as well as she could remember, and begged that the men might be sent to care for her favorite.

"No horse was in sight as we passed over the ground," answered her father. "Merlin has recovered his legs and gone home at the best of his speed. We must follow him now."

"Ye go not hence to-night!" cried Matlin. "Send on your followers, an ye list, but the ledly is tired enough. Here is a couch," and he threw open a door at the end of the kitchen. "Let her rest, while we wait for the dawn by the fire. Nay—I crave your help, Sir Baron, for one that needs it sair; the wounded officer yonder."

The baron was pleased with the suggestion, and bade his daughter take the needed repose. "I will

not leave ye, girl; trust to me for that. James and Warnock may ride home with news of your safety; for Margaret is well-nigh frantic; and Alleck may fetch a surgeon for our host's sick friend. Away with ye, lads. Herrick and I will keep watch by the fire, here."

While he examined his weapons, the men dispersed to do his bidding; and Matlin brought out skins, which he threw over a wooden settle and signed to his elder guest to use it as a bed. But Swinton chose to watch. Herrick walked restlessly to and fro; sometimes going out into the night air and reconnoitering the neighborhood; sometimes stooping over the bed on which the officer lay, and listening to hear his breathing. Many times he questioned Mat to know what he thought of his chance for life, but received no satisfactory answer.

It was dawn before the messengers returned; and the sun was flooding the east with crimson and gold, when the surgeon arrived. He made a close examination of the injured man, who by this time had awakened, and was able to speak.

"He has had a narrow escape," was his answer to young Herrick, who questioned him eagerly. "I canna say yet if he will win through it. His ribs were broken in the accidental fall, and his strength is sair spent."

"It was nae accident," moaned the sufferer, with all the energy he could command. "The man meant to slay me."

"What man, d'ye say?"

"The auld man, with the white hair, and flowing beard. He was like yon lad"—pointing to Herrick—"but he was aulder."

"Sir Kenneth?" muttered the surgeon.

"Kenneth Maur!" echoed the baron. "Ye're dreaming, man. He is no assassin!"

Herrick gave his noble cousin a grateful look.

The hurt man continued to moan: "He did it! he did it!"

The surgeon interfered with an order for him to be quiet. He bandaged the man's side, then administered a sedative, with some light nourishment.

Matlin and one of the attendants had prepared breakfast. It was laid in the kitchen; steaks of savory venison with rashers of bacon, bread and coffee. The men partook heartily of the good cheer.

The seer was lamenting that he had no woman to wait on the bonnie ledly, when the door of the small bedroom opened, and Alicia came forth, pale but much refreshed by her slumber and a partial bath in the basin of water provided. She embraced her father, wished a good-morning to Herrick and Matlin, and caressed Snath, the dog, who had learned already to fawn on her.

It was time to be moving. The horses were ready. The baron gave Herrick a pressing invitation to return with them to Stone Crag and remain there.

"It should be your home, lad," he said; "for you are of my own blood, and must wear the title some day. I have longed to do a kinsman's part by you; why not let it be now?"

"Come with us, Herrick," the maiden added.

He looked earnestly in her face, and a flush rose to his brow.

The seer gave his counsel for the youth to accept the offer.

"The castle is nae your place now," said he, "when the chief is gone."

"But I must go there first," the young man said.

"They may want me yet."

"Go, then, boy, and come to us the night," added the baron. "We will expect you ere sunset."

It was thus settled. As the youth took his leave, his lingering gaze fell on the maiden's face. Her look of grateful regard encouraged him. He was walking swiftly toward the castle when the girl, mounted on one of the men's horses, was riding homeward by her father's side.

Matlin, having received a liberal fee for his hospitality, busied himself with the sick man, and soon had the hut to himself.

It was like returning after a victory to the youthful maiden to be welcomed so warmly. Margaret had come up from her mother's cottage to receive her, and wept tears of joy at her safety, and of sympathy at the story of her adventures.

Merlin was found at his stables, much the worse for his loss of blood, but well cared for by the hostler. The first visit his mistress paid was to her pet steed, and his eyes brightened at sight of her, and at the touch of her caressing hand.

The baron gave orders for the best horse to be saddled and sent to the castle for his kinsman's use in coming; and for one of the best rooms to be prepared for his occupancy. An attendant was quickly dispatched, on another steed to seek Herrick, and attend him to his new home.

"For he must not leave us again," he said to his daughter. "That battered old den by the sea-coast, half-ruined as it is, is uninhabitable for civilized creatures. And after what has happened, Kenneth will have to stay beyond seas."

"Do you really believe he was guilty of violence to that poor officer?" asked the girl.

"Who knows? As like as not. Kenneth was aye too ready with his fist and his sword. They had a scuffle, it is likely. They say 'the chief,' as they call him, had a bullet-wound in his shoulder; 'tis not like him to let his enemy escape. If the man dies he will be hanged for his murder, an he ventures back."

Alicia gave a shudder of horror.

"The lad is best off here. I have tried to give him better training, years ago; now he must do my bidding. This smuggler's life is not for kinsman of mine. I want a young fellow of my own blood to be in place of my steward; and you would like a brother, eh, Alicia?"

"But Herrick has wild ways, papa."

"As any other savage! He must learn to curb his

headstrong will and unruly spirit. I will tame, and you must refine him, my sweet daughter."

Alicia sighed as she thought how hopeless a task that was like to be.

The baron's orders were executed while his daughter retired to her own apartments for change of dress and the refreshment of sleep to make up what she had lost during the night. Margaret was with her when she awoke. The housekeeper and servants had put in order two other suits of rooms for expected guests.

"Come and see them," said Margaret. "They are curiously alike, and they communicate through the dressing-rooms. The nearest the rear is for your cousin, Herrick Maur. Ah, dear friend and sister, who knows what views your father has for that fortunate young man!"

Alicia looked at her inquiringly.

"He is to be the heir; he is the adopted son and brother. Is it not so?"

"Ay, Margaret. It has been my father's wish since I was a child. He wanted to take Herrick under his care when but a boy, running wild through the country, robbing seabirds' nests, and risking his life in rough ventures. But his father would never part with him."

"He has no learning, and knows naught of the arts of civilized life."

"Not much. My father would have sent him to the best university in England."

"Too late now."

"But he is skilled in sports of the field; and papa has a passion for those, you know."

"Yes, dear, your father will enjoy the youngster's society."

"Therefore he is welcome."

"And in time, the baron may look upon him, the last of his line, as a fitting mate for his daughter."

"Nay, Margaret, you go too far. Scarce two days since you were predicting a different fortune for me," said Alicia, turning to her mirror to let down her beautiful hair.

"What is the proverb about the wooer on the spot faring better than the one who is not—meaning not at hand?" asked Margaret.

"Spare me your proverbs, I implore you."

"And sit ye down, while I dress your rebellious locks, sweet foster-sister! You know there is naught unlikely in my fancy."

"You shall talk thus of no young man who is to be our guest, Margaret!" cried the girl, offended. "Herrick saved my life yesterday; rescued me when I had no chance of succor; left his kinsmen to lead me to safety! I will receive him as an own brother! You shall not set me against him with your silly gossip."

"Oh, pardon me, Alicia."

"Know you, girl, for what guest the other suit of rooms is prepared?"

"For a visitor from London."

The maiden started and let fall her handkerchief. As she stooped to regain it, her face was crimson to her sunny brown curls.

Margaret smiled as she noted this, but forbore to tease her.

"I think you have never seen Sir Victor Wilder," she said, demurely, while she brushed her friend's hair, and wound the ringlets round her finger.

Alicia repeated the name and shook her head.

"A letter came last evening from him, and the baron gave orders for the front apartments to be made ready."

"Is he a hunting baronet?" asked Alicia.

"I cannot tell; but I think not. There was no talk of hounds. Perhaps he comes to hunt hearts, fair lady?"

The young girl held up her finger reprovingly.

"Your mind is aye running on wooers and suitors, Margaret. Pray talk of something else."

"What is there of such interest to a couple of lassies, to whom the sight of a young gentleman is a rare treat? Fie, Alicia, your indifference is affected! You—a beautiful young maiden, the only child of a doting father, the only hope of an ancient house, with blue blood in your veins, and muckle siller to your dower—"

"Have done, foolish wench."

"That you should scorn the very mention of new suitors! My life upon it, the two gallants who are to occupy your lordly chambers, will be drawing swords for your favor before the moon has waned to a crescent."

"They will have more wit, be sure, and I will have more sense than to be won by the victor in a bloody contest! But I am curious about this Sir Victor. How is it that my father has never mentioned him?"

"Out of sight out of mind! He was in London. His coming so far north must have an object, and what can that be but to woo the lovely heiress? Hast ever been in London, sweetheart?"

"Never. My father half-promised to take me there this season."

"You should be presented at court! Such a sensation as your beauty would create! When you go, love, let me be your tirewoman and your secretary, to answer the love-billetts that will be sure to come like a cloud."

"Tush, girl!" Alicia started up and ran to the window.

"Who has come?" she asked, eagerly.

"One of the knights! Hark!"

The noise and trampling of horses came up like a tempest from the court below. Voices of servants running hither and thither; the voice of the baron giving orders, the clanging of the gates, the opening and shutting of doors, and the general confusion betokened an arrival of unusual consequence.

CHAPTER IX.

THE YOUNG MARQUIS OF ESTONBURY.

BEFORE the town-house of the Marquis of Estonbury, in Piccadilly, a long array of mourning carriages was drawn up.

The exterior of the noble mansion, half-shrouded with ivy, bore the usual tokens of mourning for the great in the realm; and within, solemn funeral state prevailed. The spacious apartments were hung with black, and the servants wore badges of crape. It was the day appointed for the removal of the remains of the distinguished peer to the family vault at Estonbury Court.

The body had lain in state several days, and was still in its casket in the room where it awaited the last removal. Near it, looking upon the attendants busy here and there, but absorbed in painful thought, stood a young man of fine figure and strikingly handsome Saxon features. Several of the servants addressed him as "my lord," and he wore the deepest mourning. He was the only son of the deceased peer, and was now invested with his title and possessions. Universal deference was shown him; but he seemed unconscious of everything but his own grief, and unable to tear himself away from the vicinity of the inanimate body of his father.

A young gentleman at last came in, took him by the arm and led him into the hall. But even the whispered consolations of his most intimate friend had no effect in soothing the bitter sorrow of the bereaved son.

We will not linger over the solemn preparations for the conveyance of the body to the ancestral seat of the marquis, where lay the ancestors of a long line of nobles. These last preparations had been delayed by the temporary illness of the marchioness.

As soon as she was able, she expressed her desire to set forth for the performance of the last duties to the departed. The entire household was to accompany her; for it was her ladyship's intention to remain at "Estonbury Court" during the summer.

When the carriage waited, in which Lady Estonbury was to take the journey, the young marquis went up to her apartments to offer her his escort down.

It was a magnificent boudoir, hung with costly paintings and draperies of damask satin. The oaken paneling was time-stained, but the window curtains and upholstery were modern in luxurious splendor. It was the lady's fancy to surround herself with all that could please the eye. Carpet, cushioned sofas and seats covered with damask satin wrought in rare patterns of embroidery, were to match with the sweeping folds of the window draperies. Tables of the finest marble held vases of fresh flowers and articles of vertu. This boudoir opened into a dressing-room furnished as superbly; and the bedchamber was beyond it.

Lady Estonbury sat at an Indian writing-desk, having just finished writing a letter. She was tall and slender in form, middle-aged, and bore the traces of great beauty; though her strongly-marked and haughty features could not now be pronounced attractive. There was a steely hardness in her eyes, and a coldness about her firmly-chiseled mouth that gave the impression of intellectual force rather than feeling.

She was dressed for the journey, in widow's mourning, and held a smelling-bottle in one hand, which she frequently applied to her nostrils.

On the other side of the room sat a young girl, looking at a miniature which she had just fastened to a gold chain depending from her belt. She was slight in form, and might be thought plain in feature, but had expressive gray eyes, soft with tender feeling, and the color came into her pale cheeks whenever she was moved. Her brown hair was parted and gathered behind in a knot, and fastened by a golden comb of the style worn by wealthy English maidens. She too wore the deepest mourning.

She looked up as the door opened, and rose from her seat as the young marquis entered, putting the miniature in her bosom.

The young man did not speak to her, though his glance met hers for an instant. He crossed the room to his mother.

Lady Estonbury looked up, and frowned.

Reginald took her hand, and stooped to kiss her cheek, but she repelled him with something like aversion.

It was no new thing for the young man to be coldly treated, and even repulsed, by the haughty lady. He could not remember that she had ever bestowed a warm caress upon him, except on one occasion. That was when he had plunged into the river, and at the risk of his own life had saved a little girl from drowning. That little girl was the one who now stood in the room.

Coldness, therefore did not surprise the young marquis. He attributed it to the wasting grief of the bereaved wife. He soothed her with words of tender affection, and protestations of his devotion to her, as both his duty and his heart prompted.

The mother interrupted his fond words with manifest impatience. She declined his escort downstairs, and bade him "take Helen," while her maid wrapped her India shawl around her, and put on her mourning bonnet with its long crape veil.

Obedient to her wish, Reginald turned to the young lady, bowed to her courteously, but with reserve, and gave her his arm. She blushed crimson as she took it to go out.

Lady Estonbury having descended, stepped into her carriage but waved back her son, when he was about to follow her.

"Helen, I want you," she called to her companion; and Reginald, in some displeasure, drew back to allow the girl to enter, and take her place beside

his mother. Her ladyship bade him take another carriage, and with a silent bow he obeyed her.

"She might have overcome her unnatural dislike of me for once, on an occasion like this," he thought. "Little kindness has she ever shown me!"

Again he gave way to his feelings, and wept the bitter tears that manhood weeps, for the loss of the parent who had ever made him the idol of his affections.

Frank Ralston, his most favored friend, was with him, having accepted his urgent invitation to stay some days at Estonbury Court. Frank was the son of a Scottish laird, and had spent much time with Reginald during his visit to the Highlands. He now put forth his best efforts to soothe and console him.

After their arrival at the Court the funeral ceremonies took place. As before, Frank endeavored to console his friend.

The usual commonplaces of the duty of a young nobleman to imitate his father's virtues, to honor his memory by great deeds rather than waste his health and energies in grieving for him, etc., were exhausted. Suddenly the marquis said:

"I am sensible, Frank, that my indulgence of grief appears selfish; but—"

"Oh, no, Reginald! I did not say that!"

"But I feel that it does. Still, if you knew what I have lost you would not blame me."

"How can you think I blame you?"

"I ought to say, if you knew how little I have left. You will say I have a mother. Do not mothers love their children, Frank?"

"Certainly. There is no love like a mother's!"

"Mine has never loved me. That is why I feel so bitterly the loss of a father who adored me."

"Lady Estonbury is not different from other women. She does love you; but she is not demonstrative in her feelings."

"She has no affection for me. She never had. She has always repelled me, when I sought for some tokens of love."

"Many aristocratic dames are too proud to show their feelings, Reginald. Calmness, even to stoicism is the fashion, you know."

"It is not that. She loves the young girl whom she has taken for a companion. I have seen her proud eyes fill with tears when she looked at her; and she makes her her constant companion."

"Who is that young girl?"

"The daughter of my father's under steward."

"I have noticed that her ladyship seems fond of her," said Frank. "Ladies often take such fancies to a hired companion."

"She has been my mother's favorite since she was a child. You see that she is made quite a member of the family."

"She has a very ladylike appearance and manner."

"Yes. She is well enough; but I think it a weakness of my mother to take the child of a servant for a pet. She has adopted her for her daughter, I understand."

"Is it possible?"

"So Chisholm, her father, told me, with his diabolical grin. At least, he declared his lady meant to do so formally. The wretch knew he could gail me by telling me of it."

"It is singular, certainly. But you must not allow your mind to be disturbed, Reginald. I have heard of such things before."

"If the girl were a lady by birth it would not be so strange."

"You are not jealous, surely!"

"No, not jealous; but I wish my lady mother had better taste. I could bring her a bright young creature she might be proud to call daughter."

"Ah, you wrote me, old fellow, of your beauty of the Scottish mountains. How fared you with her?" cried Ralston, glad to change the subject of his friend's discontent.

"I had to come away without leave-taking," answered the young lord with a sigh. He went on: "When do you return, Frank? Excuse an inhospitable question."

"I am 'due' in a week."

"Then you must accept my company."

"With all my heart."

"I shall go mad if I stay here! And I must see again the girl who has charmed me! With that angel by my side, Frank, I could meet the sorrows of life with true courage!"

"Never despond! What have you to do with sorrows—young, rich and noble? Have you 'told your love'?"

"Not yet. But I go on that errand. Wish me good luck, Frank!"

"I do, heartily. It will be a day of rejoicing when you bring home a fair wife to Estonbury Court!"

"Nay, she has not accepted me. Your good wishes may be premature."

"You have nothing to fear, I'll warrant me! You have much to offer, Reginald."

"I would not seek the love of a young girl who could think of wealth and rank as an inducement to accept me."

"I was not thinking of them. Your personal qualities—your noble character—are what might win any maiden's heart."

They were in the library at the Court, the day after the funeral, when the foregoing conversation took place.

Before Reginald could answer, the steward, Chisholm, came with some papers to solicit his attention. Ralston could not but notice his insolence of manner to his lord. This was habitual to him; but hitherto the young marquis had been too absorbed to pay any heed to it. Now, he looked up in surprise at the man's audacity, and calmly ordered him out of his presence.

"I shall discharge him to-morrow," he said, quietly. "And I fear he meditates some trick to vex you more than ever!" was Frank's response.

CHAPTER X.

A DOWAGER'S PROTEGEE.

REGINALD did as he had resolved. He gave orders for the steward to attend him in his morning-room next day, and there informed him that he should dispense with his services, at the end of the month.

"I need not give my reasons," he added. "You need not, my lord," answered the man, with the sardonic grin that had so often displeased his master, and an indescribable insolence of tone. "I have expected this whenever you should come into power. My wife goes with me, I suppose?"

"She will do so, naturally." "But your lordship"—with a low bow that strongly savored of mockery, and his accustomed leer—"will not take it upon yourself to dismiss your lady mother's confidential attendant?"

"I shall dismiss whom I please, without consulting you; be assured of that," answered the young nobleman, chafed more than he cared to acknowledge by the man's cool audacity. "It is not my intention to make changes in the household; but I will not tolerate any want of respect."

"So long as your lordship has a right to command it, you ought to exact your due," the man said, his dark, wrinkled face distorted with an evil sneer.

There was an ominous emphasis in his words, which moved the marquis to demand what he meant; but on reflection he only waved his hand, in token that the steward should leave him.

Chisholm was a middle-aged man, tall, bony, and thin in form, with a face on which the evil passions of greed, envy and malice had left their ineffaceable stamp. His complexion was swarthy, and his black hair, slightly grizzled, hung over his forehead in bushy masses, while his beard, of growth as thick, almost concealed his chin. His eyes were deep-set, piercing, and intensely black, with a furtive glance that betrayed a mind never altogether at ease. The deep wrinkles in his forehead and cheeks gave him the appearance of being older than he was in reality; yet he could certainly be pronounced forty-five at least.

There had always been something strange in his demeanor toward the young heir of the house, restrained, however, by fear in some degree, so long as the old marquis lived. Since his death no sympathy or kindness had caused the suppression of the rebellious or hostile feeling that seemed to exist toward his young master.

He had received all orders either with impertinent indifference or with a sneering affectation of humility, annoying to his lord, even while he gave no thought to its possible cause, or to ridding himself of a servant so obnoxious. Now that he had spoken his mind for once, Reginald wished to think no more of the subject.

"I have but a word to say," added the man, as he shuffled toward the door.

"It is your lordship's will that I go at the end of the current month. It is *my* will that I do it at the end of this week."

Reginald answered:

"Whenever you please. Now you will leave the room."

Chisholm glared at him, and an angry fire leaped from his eyes.

"The young viper," he muttered under his breath; but he quailed before the firm command in the eyes of his master, and hurried from the room.

The young man felt more disturbed than he quite understood. There seemed a mystery in the evident malignity of the man, which it pained his generous heart to see in any of his dependents. It was his wish to be kind and indulgent to all his household. He could easily provide himself with another steward; indeed Chisholm was but a subordinate to the general steward of the estate, whose business it would be to fill his place. But how would it be with Lady Estonbury, who might resent having her favorite maid taken from her at her husband's departure?

It was a relief to take two hours' gallop with Frank Ralston. They returned in time for lunch.

Reginald could see that his mother had been informed of the steward's dismissal. She met him with looks colder and haughtier than ever. But she did not allude in words to what had passed.

The young peer spent the afternoon in writing letters, and in a quiet ramble with his friend. They talked of Scotland and the intended journey thither. In the discourse concerning the wondrous scenery of the Highlands, Reginald's heart expanded. Their plans were formed. After the young lover's visit to Stone Crag, they would have an equestrian tour through the wildest of the mountain passes, lingering beside the lochs so famed in ballad minstrelsy. The summer would close with a trip in Estonbury's yacht among the islands off the northern coast. In the autumn, if fortune crowned his love-suit with prosperity, Reginald would take his friend to Stone Crag, and bear away his lovely bride for a lengthened tour on the Continent. A winter in Italy, and the happiness he anticipated with some tremulous fear of failure, would restore his spirits and courage to enter on the duties, social and political, which his exalted rank imposed.

Alas that the purest aspirations of the noble heart should be at the mercy of the wicked to crush and mar them! That the resolutions of the brave, the upright, and the true, should be thwarted by cruel fate, which no energy could have power to change!

The evening of the day previous to that fixed for the departure of the young men arrived.

They were to go first to London, for the transaction of necessary business with Lord Estonbury's

solicitors, and a farewell visit of young Ralston with some of his college friends. That would detain them but two or three days from the projected excursion, anticipated with the eagerness of ardent youth, and the anxiety of hopeful love.

Chisholm had taken his departure. Reginald had offered to give him a reference as to his ability and fidelity to business, which would be useful in procuring another situation. But the man declined it with his usual sneer. He could easily find employment; he was not, in fact, dependent on his wits or his labor; he had those who had an interest in looking after him, as his lordship might learn some time; it was not all of the noble family he had served so long who were ungrateful, etc.

Reginald assured him he was rejoiced to hear that his prospects were so good. He would be glad to remember his past services, and do aught in his power for him should he need it hereafter.

"Oh, as to that," the man replied, "it is not likely I shall ever be beholden to your lordship. It may be the other way. And, while I think of it, here is the card of my address in London. If your lordship should ever be in trouble that I can relieve, you may apply to me!" And he shot a glance of malicious significance into his master's eyes.

"Thanks," replied the peer. "One knows not what may happen in the future; and good-will is always a valuable aid."

"Very true, your lordship."

Reginald felt as though a load were lifted from his heart when the man left his presence.

That last evening Lady Estonbury spent in the drawing-room, and was more gracious than usual to the guest—the young laird's son. Her companion, Helen, was there too, and by her ladyship's desire, sung and played several times. Once the marchioness requested her son to sing a duet with the girl.

Helen walked to the piano, and selected the music herself. She placed it on the desk and waited for the first notes; but Reginald hesitated. His pride was stirred. Was he ever thus to have this girl thrust on his notice?

Lady Estonbury gave him a look of stern displeasure. She was pale, and her lips quivered. The young man glanced from her to Helen; a misgiving stirred within him that the girl was in the conspiracy. But the imploring expression of her soft eyes disarmed him. He took his place beside her; commenced and went through the duet; and even complimented the girl at its close upon her admirable culture in music and her superb voice. Frank was enthusiastic in his applause.

Reginald was surprised by the change in his mother at this trifling incident. She smiled; her whole face was transfigured; she held out her white hand with a warm expression of approbation, and called him "my son." The young man lifted the hand to his lips, and kissed it fervently.

The conversation became general, and was pleasantly kept up till bedtime, when the tray of candles was brought in by the footman. The two young men were to leave the Court early the next morning, on their journey. They bade adieu for many weeks, as they said good-night.

Lady Estonbury shook hands with both, making no difference between them in her manner, and only suffering her son to touch her cheek with his lips, without giving him an answering caress.

Her attention seemed fixed on Helen, whom she called quickly to her side. The girl arose from her seat by a table at a little distance, and came with evident reluctance. The lady was holding her son's hand. She caught that of the young girl, and placed it in his.

"Take leave of her, Reginald," she said, and he noticed that her voice trembled with suppressed excitement.

He bowed over the fair girl's hand, respectfully, and murmured some commonplaces of farewell, then moved away.

He saw the crimson that suffused her whole face, and the drooping of her lashes on her cheek, indicating her painful embarrassment.

He saw, too, that his lady mother watched him with an eager flash in her eyes, and with more emotion than he had ever seen her manifest.

He bowed again to her, and walked quickly out of the room. He and Frank ascended the stairs together, and stopped a moment by the door of Ralston's chamber. Their whispered conference lasted but a few minutes, and then Reginald passed on to his own room.

He threw himself into a chair. What was the meaning of his mother's conduct? He could not fathom it! She evidently wished to establish friendly and intimate relations between him and her young protegee; but to what end?

Then he thought of her lonely widowhood, and the necessary seclusion she would have to undergo during his absence; during the time when he hoped to win the crowning happiness of his life. The society and love of that young girl was a solace to her. Ought he not to rejoice that she had found an object of love? He thought of the timid, tender looks of the shy maiden, and in his heart acquitted her of the least presumption. Low born she might be; but she was a lady in heart and manner; a sweet, affectionate creature, to whom he felt grateful for the devotion of her life to the dowager whom he knew to be unhappy amid the splendors of wealth and rank. He forgave both for the coldness shown him by his mother, and mentally prayed that she might be blessed in her own way.

There was a tap at his door, so light he did not at first heed it, till it was repeated. He answered by an invitation to come in.

The door opened softly, and a woman about forty years of age, dressed in a black silk, plainly made, and with high corsage, with her hair smoothly fold-

ed under a cap, entered. The young man knew her for Mrs. Chisholm, the wife of the discharged steward, and his mother's favorite maid.

He started up at sight of her. He had not inquired whether or not she had accompanied her husband; and his impression now was, that she had come to intercede for his restoration to his place on the estate.

The woman seemed to divine his thoughts. She spoke quickly:

"I see you are surprised, my lord, at my being here still. I did not go with my husband; but I am to follow him soon."

"Indeed!"

"I had to attend to selling off our furniture and shutting up the house we have been living in; the house at the end of the park, your lordship knows; and my lady—"

"No matter, good Mrs. Chisholm; let everything be as you please," said her young master, leaning with one hand on the table, and still standing. He was anxious to be relieved of her unaccountable presence.

She looked at him wistfully, as if she wanted to say something, yet dared not. Suddenly she came up to the table, bent her clasped hands upon it, and looked eagerly and imploringly in the young peer's face.

"Oh, pardon me, my lord!" she wailed; "pardon me, whatever happens!"

"Why, what can happen?"

"Forgive me, as you hope to be forgiven! It was not my fault! Oh, believe that, and forgive!"

The tears were now streaming down her white face; she sunk on her knees, stretching forth her clasped hands, like a criminal condemned, suing for mercy.

"Woman, I do not understand you," answered Reginald, rather sternly. "If you have been guilty of a fault, you should appeal to your mistress, not to me!"

"No—no. It is you—it is your lordship I look to for mercy," she gasped, through a passion of tears.

"Rise from that unbecoming posture. If you come to ask me to receive Chisholm again I cannot do it."

"No, no, my lord, not that!"

"For any other request you must go to your mistress. It is a disrespect to her to come to me."

"My lady sent me to your lordship," said the woman, in a voice scarcely audible for her sobs.

"Sent you? For what purpose?"

He saw that the dame shivered from head to foot. She hesitated, struggling to calm herself.

"For what, I asked you? Have you offended your lady, and want me to intercede for you?"

"My lady wishes to see your lordship," was the stammering reply.

"To see me, to-night?"

"Immediately, my lord. She is in the drawing-room."

"Very well; I will go to her."

He waved his hand. The woman, her features still convulsed, her face white with evident apprehension, obeyed his commands. At the door she turned quickly, and sobbed, faintly, as in despair:

"Whatever happens, it was not my fault."

CHAPTER XI.

LADY ESTONBURY'S COMMAND.

LADY ESTONBURY was still in the drawing-room. She was standing with one arm upon the richly-sculptured marble mantelpiece, her head uplifted; her eyes fixed on vacancy; her complexion blanched to a sickly pallor. Her very lips were colorless. Her sweeping black dress, and the thin tissue that shaded her neck and arms, were in accordance with her woe-worn aspect. The tissue had fallen from the arm that rested on the marble, and showed it to be white and exquisitely rounded.

She did not move when Reginald entered, but he went up to her instantly, and took her hand.

"Mother, what is it? Dear mother, you are not well!"

She drew her hand away.

"I am quite well, Reginald," she said. "I wished to speak with you alone."

"Your maid told me so. Has anything happened?"

"Things are always happening. Every day there are changes."

"I mean—to distress you?"

"I cannot say. All things distress me. It is no new thing for me to be wretched!"

"Mother, dearest mother!" cried the young man, impetuously, "I entreat you to give me your confidence. Tell me all your grief. No one is, or should be, more devoted to you than your own son."

"If I tell you my wishes will you respect—will you obey them?"

"So far as my power extends, you may be sure that I will."

"If I were only sure of it—"

"Believe in my affection, in my dutiful obedience! Oh, mother, I have longed for your love! I have tried to deserve it. Tell me what I can do for your happiness!"

"Sit down, there," said the lady, pointing to a seat on one side of a table inlaid with marquetry, and loaded with books and rare and elegant trifles, while she sunk into a cushioned chair on the nearer side.

She was silent for a few moments, till her son again besought her to tell him how he could remove any cause of unhappiness that oppressed her.

She did not remove the hand that partly concealed her face, her elbow resting on the table, as she responded:

"You can make me happy, Reginald."

"Tell me how; only tell me!" besought he, in tones that showed his earnestness. "What sacrifice

would not seem light to me, if borne for your sake! if it secured your peace of mind!"

"It is easy to talk of sacrifices," said the lady, resuming her usual *hauteur*; "it is hard to make them. With all your smooth professions, my lord, I fear you would shrink from one I could name as a test of your sincerity."

"Surely, mother, this is unjust to me—this tone and conclusion."

"True, the test has not been applied."

"I entreat you, do not torture me!"

Lady Estonbury's manner suddenly changed.

"Reginald, have you ever thought of marrying?"

"Of marrying?"

"Certainly. To a young nobleman who has just come into possession of vast estates, and an ancient title, the idea is most natural. It is your nearest duty. Your inheritance demands it of you."

Her ladyship spoke in the light, almost trifling manner in which any worldly mother might recommend matrimony. But it was easy to see that she suppressed intense excitement. Reginald could not understand her, but he resolved to be frank.

"I acknowledge the truth of what you say, mother," he replied. "And more than all, my own wishes prompt me to the early fulfillment of what you term my duty."

"Your wishes prompt you to marriage?" the lady asked, quickly, a flush crossing her pale cheeks.

"They do, indeed. A lovely wife is the crowning happiness and glory of man's life."

"One who loves you, and who is worthy of love," cried the mother.

"I mean that."

"You are beloved, Reginald, by a pure and noble girl; one worthy of a coronet, or a crown—one whose whole heart is your own, and who will be to me the sweetest of daughters."

The thought flashed upon Reginald that his mother knew the maiden of his love. Of whom else could she thus speak?

"It will make me happy beyond the power of words to utter, my dear mother, if you approve my love and my suit. I have not yet spoken to her; but she knows—she must know—my feelings—"

"She knows nothing!—she suspects nothing!" interrupted Lady Estonbury, impetuously. "No tender, drooping flower has more shrinking delicacy; she would die with shame if she knew I was pleading for her! She has never disclosed to me the passion that long ago took possession of her whole being! She dreams not that I have read her soul in its depths! You may lose no time in speaking to her, Reginald; or you may commission me! Shall I tell her she is to be your bride?"

A terrible misgiving rushed upon the young man's heart, chilling and gripping it as with a hand of iron. He rose from his seat.

"Mother! I fear there is some awful mistake between us! With my heart full of one object, I understood you to be speaking of her. Where is—the maiden to whom you allude? Not in England?"

"In England; and in this house. Have you not understood me to speak of my beloved Helen?"

"Of Helen Chisholm?"

"Of the maiden I have adopted. She shall bear that name no longer! It will be a glad day for me when she changes it for yours."

"Mother, can it be possible?"

"Possible, what?"

"That you would have your son marry one so far beneath him—however worthy of respect in her own person—in birth and blood! The daughter of my father's steward, and of your waiting-maid!"

"Take care what you say, rebellious boy!" cried Lady Estonbury, growing deadly pale. "Hail me—thought you esteemed any sacrifice light, to please your mother!"

"But this—this *mesalliance*—it would not only be a sacrifice but a degradation!"

"Silence! you insult me!"

"My honored mother! what fitness would there be in the Marquis of Estonbury wedding the daughter of his household servants?"

"I say, I have taken her for my own! I have adopted and educated her. How dare you say she is not your equal, or grateful boy?"

"You cannot change her lineage; her blood. Mother, the very idea is preposterous!"

"Reginald, do not dare deceive me. You have fixed your affections upon another!"

"I have, irrevocably. I mean to marry her, and none but her. I love her with my whole heart and soul, and the happiness of my life depends on a union with her."

Lady Estonbury stood grasping the top of her chair. Her face was ghastly pale, her eyes blazed defiance and fury.

"And who is this paragon?" she gasped.

"I will reveal her name when I have seen her, and learned my fate from her lips. It is to her I shall journey, after we leave London."

The lady fairly ground her teeth with rage.

"Some base adventuress!" she hissed.

"No, mother; the lady of my love belongs to the proudest blood in the realm! Her family is more ancient than our own. Her father wears a title established in the Norman Conqueror's reign; and though he is now impoverished and shorn of his great estate, he can yet command respect among the grandest of our peerage. Do not fear your son will ever degrade his name—the name I took unblemished from my princely father."

The lady brought her clenched hand down forcibly upon the table.

"And I say, degenerate boy, that you shall never marry her!—never! I have chosen for you, and I will be obeyed, or you must take the consequences!"

The young marquis looked at her in speechless amazement.

"I say you shall marry none but the one I have chosen! I will receive no other!"

In a moment Reginald's calmness returned.

"It will be a matter of regret, certainly," he said, somewhat coldly, "that you are opposed to my choice. I will speak with you further, or communicate with you, hereafter."

"You shall not go!" cried his mother, passionately, "without a pledge—a promise that you will submit to my wishes."

"Surely that is too much to ask, Lady Estonbury! I owe my mother all respect and deference; but you must be aware that you cannot, with propriety, interfere in a matter of this kind!"

"I can and I will!" she answered, imperiously.

"I will have it as I choose, or you shall reap such punishment as you never thought could descend on you!"

"She must have lost her reason!" was the inward comment of the young man's thoughts. He was silent a few moments.

"Will you promise to do as I wish?" demanded the lady.

"I will make no promises," returned her son.

"We will talk of this when I return."

"Will you then be disposed to obey me?"

"To marry as you bid me? No, madam, I cannot leave you to cherish such a hope. I may be disappointed in my own hopes. I may lose the prize I covet; but never will I stoop to an alliance unfitting my birth and station, and with one whom I could never love!"

"Ungrateful boy, it is *you* who are unworthy!" gasped the lady, in a voice nearly choked by her emotions. Suddenly changing her tone, she flung aside the chair she held, and sunk to her knees.

"See, Reginald," she said, "your mother kneels to you! I am the most wretched of women! the prey of demons that tear my soul to atoms! I supplicate you for mercy! You alone can save me, can give me peace! Pity me! pity me! I implore you!"

He rushed to raise her from the floor; he supported her to a seat, and endeavored to soothe her. The terrible conviction took possession of him that she was laboring under delirium.

"You are ill, dear mother; you are feverish. Let me summon assistance! Indeed, you must have it!"

He was about to ring the bell; but she rushed after him, and caught his arm.

"What do you mean? Do you think I have lost my senses?"

"I think—I am sure—you need medical aid!"

"Pshaw; foolish boy! Do not drive me to say what I shall wish unsaid. I am as clear in my mind as you are; as fully in possession of my reason—of all my mental faculties! I repeat it, I am wretched beyond the power of language to describe! You can banish my grief—and you alone!"

"I cannot understand you!"

"No—you cannot; but you would understand if I should tear the veil from my bleeding, broken heart, and show you the dreadful anguish you doom me to!"

"There is a strange mystery in your words, my mother!"

"Be it so—a mystery; but no lack of reason! Some day it may be explained. All I have to say now is, will you save your mother from misery unspeakable?"

"I would give my life to save you from such distress, if I knew—"

"Always an 'if'! Nothing but submission will content me!"

"Nothing but sealing the misery of my own life by a marriage that would be deemed disgraceful, and with one repulsive to me?"

"And you refuse to wed her, even though I have asked you on my knees, as for the boon of life?"

"I cannot perjure myself by false vows! Do you know, mother, what would happen, if you could force me to compliance?"

"What?"

"I could never endure the sight or companionship of such a bride! no—not for an hour! I would become a fugitive from England! I would live and die in some far distant foreign land!"

"You might," was the reply, "if you so lightly esteemed the blessing you had won as to forsake her!"

"And knowing this, would you still urge me to the sacrifice?"

"I would still urge you, though it cost your life!" the lady muttered, compressing her lips firmly.

"Enough! What strange inquisition binds you to that girl, I know not! I only know that your commands ought not to force me to part forever with honor, honesty, manhood! You yourself would despise me for such abject prostration of my better self."

"Have a care, Reginald! I can punish disobedience; ay, most fearfully!"

"How can you punish me for refusing to take false vows, and make myself a wretch unworthy to crawl at the feet of honest men?"

"You laugh to scorn my threats! You esteem yourself a great nobleman, invested with the dignity of your father's title and wealth, and think nothing of disappointing me! You spurn me when I abase myself to kneel to you! to supplicate for what I could command! Have a care, I say! I can strip you of all your possessions! I can tear the coronet from your head! I can reduce you lower than the girl you despise! Beware how you tempt, how you force me to do it!"

Again Reginald gazed on the speaker in utter surprise. He could not reconcile her words with the supposition of her absolute sanity.

She continued to glare upon him with set teeth and flashing eyes. As she seemed to expect an answer, he gave it quietly:

"Mother, you speak in riddles! But if it were true that the consequences of my refusal would be

the loss of fortune and title, I would be firm in it! I would not stain my soul with falsehood!"

He hoped that her next words would be a fulfillment of her threat. But her mood had changed.

"Begone!" she exclaimed, in the hoarse tone of despair. "I will say no more now!"

"Will you not relent—my mother? Will you not give me your blessing?"

He approached her, knelt on one knee, and tried to take her hand. But she snatched it away with a muttered execration, and again bade him leave her.

"Begone, ere I lose all self-command! My vengeance shall follow you!"

"Nay, mother, you will relent, on reflection, and acknowledge that I am right! You will justify me, when the coils of that serpent fascination are loosened? May that time come speedily!"

And, fearful of another outbreak, he retired from the room, marveling at the strange influence that seemed to have taken possession of her. Could the mere stubbornness of woman's will, crossed in some cherished plan, have worked her up to such a paroxysm?

CHAPTER XII.

A STRANGE DISCLOSURE.

LORD ESTONBURY and Frank Ralston were settled at a hotel at the West End of London. Some days had been spent in the business with his solicitors that had brought the young marquis to town.

He did not delay another visit on which he had resolved: to the physician who had always attended the family when in town, and who knew every member of it almost as well as his own children.

To this faithful friend and skillful adviser the young man confided his misgivings and fears for his mother's reason. He related what had occurred, and gave his own impressions.

No; the Marchioness of Estonbury had never shown the slightest symptom of aberration of mind. Her family, as far as it could be traced, had no such taint; had no taint of any disease. She came of pure and vigorous stock. Her health had always been robust; she had scarcely known what sickness was. Dr. Harcourt decidedly was of opinion that her mind was perfectly sound, and that her strange conduct must be due to some other cause. She had always shown an imperious and determined temper; and when her heart was set upon an object, she would move heaven and earth to accomplish it.

He had known several instances in which mothers seemed devoid of affection for their offspring; an alienation which amounted to positive aversion in one or two whom he could name. And he had known ladies who surrendered their whole hearts to a misguided affection for some alien to their own blood. It must be so in this case. Lady Estonbury had taken an unaccountable fancy to the young girl born under her protection; she had found the object of her regard deserving, and had, unwittingly at first, nourished in the girl an attachment for her son. She felt herself responsible for the growth of this passion; the girl was a dependent on her care; and she was resolved to marry her to the marquis. She fancied she would thus secure the happiness of both, while she gratified the love that had wound itself round her heartstrings. That kind of fascination was not uncommon. Lady Estonbury's iron will made her firm as a rock in resolving to carry out her wishes.

Lord Estonbury was constrained to accept this explanation; but he was not satisfied. He induced Dr. Harcourt to promise that he would pay a visit at Estonbury Court, and observe her ladyship closely, while talking with her as a friend. He would communicate the opinion resulting from his interview at once to the marquis.

Reginald was in his chamber one afternoon, of the day before the time fixed for his departure for Scotland with Ralston. His business was concluded; his yacht was under orders to meet the young men, as soon as their tour in the mountains was finished at a certain point on the coast; the prospect seemed fair for a pleasant trip, and the young man's heart bounded as his fancy roved to the spot which was his first destination. He had written twice to the Baron of Swinton: once, soon after his father's burial; a second time, after their arrival in London, to say he hoped soon again to claim his hospitality. There was a warmth in the tone of the letter, which he intended to convey something of the feelings of his heart. His chivalrous homage, too, was breathed in the message sent to the baron's fair daughter. If he could, he would thus have told the story of his love.

He was seated in his chamber at the hotel. The windows and bed were curtained with embroidered white muslin. Flowers and glossy-leaved evergreens stood in vases on either side of an oval swing dressing-glass, on the marble top of a bureau. The walls were hung with four pictures in black walnut frames leaving much of the space bare. The carpet was light, of a neat pattern, with clusters of flowers in the center of squares. The furniture was of the modern style, different from the massive antique of former days.

The door was open leading into the parlor belonging to the suite. It, too, was tastefully furnished, and was the handsomest the hotel afforded.

"Come in!" the young peer called out, in answer to a light tap at the door of his parlor. "Come in, Frank! Why do you use the ceremony of knocking?"

The door opened slowly and softly. The rustle of a woman's dress was heard.

Reginald rose, threw aside the "Traveler's Guide" he had been consulting, to make himself familiar with the projected route through the Highlands and walked into the outer room.

He wondered that the servant had not announced a strange visitor. By this time the woman had en-

tered. She made a formal courtesy, and drew aside her veil.

"Mrs. Chisholm!" he exclaimed, in utter astonishment. "Tell me at once, has anything happened to my mother?"

"Lady Estonbury is quite well," was the reply; the words being jerked out, as it were, each with a spasmodic effort.

"I am glad, indeed, to hear it. Why, then, did her ladyship send you to me?"

"My lady did not send me; leastwise she did not tell me to come, though she knew I would come, and she approved of it," the woman answered, faltering sadly in her embarrassment.

"Then you have left service at the court?"

"I have, my lord. It was my duty to come with my husband."

"And what can I do for you, Mrs. Chisholm?"

He had not offered her a seat, though she looked as if one would be welcome; nor had he taken one himself. He felt annoyed at her coming to him in this unceremonious way.

"I have an engagement this afternoon, and am on the eve of a journey. Please to be brief, therefore, in saying what you wish me to do for you."

The woman shuffled from one foot to the other, glanced about her, and seemed at a loss how to begin. Then she retreated toward the door, which was still open, and beckoned to some one outside.

A man advanced from the head of the stairway, came to the door, and boldly entering, stood beside the trembling woman.

"A strange proceeding this!" said Reginald. "How is it, Mr. Chisholm, that you venture into my presence in this way?"

"To support the courage of my wife," the man replied, with a touch of his former defiant insolence. "She can never get through with what she undertook."

"She comes with news, then?"

"Ay, news of importance to all of us."

"But she said her lady was well."

"It is not that. We are here to disclose to you, sir, the secret which your lady mother—as you call her—shrank from telling you."

"You deal in enigmas which I do not care to study. If there be any secret concerning your late mistress and myself, I prefer to hear it from her."

"She—my lady—tried to tell you; but she could not. Proud lady though she is, there are some things that humble her, and ought to crush her to the very dust."

"This is no language to use in my presence, and I shall hold no discourse with you—with either of you—on a subject in which my mother is involved."

"Oh, my lord!" cried the woman, wringing her hands, "let him speak! My lady bade him! You had better hear it from him than from others who do not care for you!"

"And the secret will soon be public property!" added the ex-steward.

"Speak, then, as briefly as possible!"

"The greatest of misfortunes," the man went on to say, "may be averted if you will only listen to her ladyship, and fulfill her dearest wishes. If you would do as she desires, marry the young girl she loves so tenderly, all may yet be well."

"Silence!" exclaimed the young nobleman, in a rage. "Do not dare intrude yourselves on me here, to urge me to disgrace my name and lineage? Lady Estonbury could not have sent you for this!"

"She did, my lord!" passionately wailed Mrs. Chisholm. "It is her last hope, as it is her dearest wish in life!"

"Preposterous! This is your scheme, from beginning to end! I see through it; and I only wonder how you ever obtained an ascendancy so great over your lady's mind as to lead her to think of such fortune for your daughter."

"You refuse to marry her, then?" asked Chisholm.

"Sir, your insolence passes bearing! Leave the room instantly, or I will ring for the servants to put you out."

"Oh, listen to him a moment—only one moment!" pleaded the woman, with streaming tears.

"Have done with all these supplications," stormed her husband. Then, addressing Reginald, who had walked to the bell and had his hand on the rope, he added:

"You must hear the truth, then, for the first time in your life. Lady Estonbury wishes you to marry no daughter of ours. Helen is not our child, but her ladyship's own daughter!"

"Are you mad, fellow?" cried the young man, contemptuously.

"I speak the solemn truth, as you will find from the proofs I shall produce."

"Helen my mother's child? my sister!"

"Not your sister! You are not the son of the marchioness, nor of her late husband!"

Another exclamation of scornful incredulity.

It seemed a dark conspiracy to wring from him his consent to the wild scheme his mother had nurtured.

"It is true—too true!" sobbed the woman, lifting her clasped hands upward. "We have kept the secret faithfully till now, for my lady's sake! She knew my lord—her late husband—was longing for an heir—for a boy to inherit his title. He raved continually of a boy; he told her ladyship he would live with her no longer if the child she was to bring him did not prove a boy! He tormented her night and day; she knew he would die of the disappointment, if it was not as he wished! She had lived many years childless, and now her very life depended on this one thing!"

"Yes," added Chisholm; "for my lord would have sent her away—in disgrace, as it were—if the expected birth disappointed his hopes."

"And you expect me to believe this folly of my father!" cried Reginald.

"Do not interrupt me. My late lord was from home when my lady's hour came. She gave birth to a girl!"

Chisholm's wife here took the word.

"They thought my lady would have died—even the nurse and the doctor—when she knew it. I was just recovering from my own confinement the night she sent for me, to our house; and my husband took me in his arms to the carriage, and carried me up the grand stairs to my lady's apartments. The nurse met me at the door, and whispered: 'Do everything she bids you—and save her life if possible!' The doctor said he had little hope of her."

"And my father was absent?"

"He was not expected for a week. He had gone to London."

"Well—go on."

"My lady was in a high fever, and I saw in a moment her danger. Contradiction would have killed her. She drew my head down close to her lips and whispered that not a soul but the nurse and the doctor knew the sex of her child. She implored me as for life itself, to grant her prayer: to let the infants be exchanged!"

Reginald, white as death, dropped into a chair and covered his face with one hand. The woman went on:

"I could not refuse to save her life. I meant to confess all to my lord when she died. The boy, my own child, was brought from our house just after midnight, by my husband, who told the servants that I was to stay all night with my lady, and must suckle him. You know we lived in the cottage at the end of the park, and none of the servants, nor any of the neighbors, had been to see me since the birth of my boy. He was brought into my lady's chamber; he was dressed in her child's clothes, and laid beside her. I took the little new-born girl into my bosom."

"Did the doctor—was it Dr. Harcourt—countenance this fraud?" demanded the young man.

"Dr. Harcourt did not come for three days afterward. You see, the birth had been ten days before it was expected. Another doctor had been called in haste from a village in the neighborhood—ten miles distant."

"Did he support the trick?"

"He never knew of it. As soon as my lady recovered, she made my lord take her away for change of air. They went abroad that summer, and more than a year and a half passed before they came home. The village doctor was told that her little girl had died, and the boy had been born later."

She continued:

"He had been ordered to say nothing of the child to any one, because it was weakly and like to die; and my lady wished it believed that her first-born was a boy."

"He assented to this falsehood?"

"I paid him a heavy sum, myself, to keep the secret," said Chisholm. "But he really believed the little girl died before my lord and lady went abroad."

"And the register of the birth?"

"That was made at the time I speak of, and of the baptism, four weeks afterward."

"The date of the registered birth was of the time when, as you say, the children were exchanged?"

"It was."

"And there is no registration of any subsequent birth?"

"None; for there was no other. Lady Estonbury never had another child."

After a pause, Reginald resumed:

"You are aware that I cannot take all this as fact, upon your word only?"

"I am prepared for disbelief," answered the ex-steward. He took a paper from the breast-pocket of his coat, and handed it to the young man. "Here is a letter from her ladyship."

Reginald took the letter. He saw that it was a long one, and refolded it. He was not then in a state of mind to examine the proofs. Chisholm gave him three other letters, on paper yellow with age. They were from the maid to her absent mistress, giving accounts of the health of the little girl, once or twice named as "Your ladyship's dear child." These were laid with the other.

"You may leave me," said Reginald. "I will look at these papers, and then they must go to my solicitors. Leave your address and be ready to give your testimony when they send for you."

A glance was exchanged between the ex-steward and his wife.

"I have another message to give you," the man added. "It would be Lady Estonbury's wish that the matter should rest here, and the secret never be divulged. If you, sir, will submit to her will, it may be so."

Reginald started to his feet. The flush of indignation swept in a crimson flood over his face.

"What!" he exclaimed, "if I will join in the conspiracy, I may be allowed to keep the stolen title and estates! Leave me, before I lose my self-control altogether!"

"You may be angry," retorted the man, "but you cannot deny that you still owe respect and duty to her ladyship. She bade me say, that if you still refused to do her bidding, and thus drove her to the confession of the secret she has kept so long, she would immediately send for Mr. Maurice Howard. He is the heir, you know, failing issue of the late marquis—and she will marry her daughter to him. She is resolved that Helen shall reign at the court."

"I have requested you both to go, now," replied Reginald taking no heed of the man's last words.

"Oh, Reginald—my son!" cried the weeping woman, "be obedient to my lady! Spare us all—spare yourself—this terrible sorrow! Think what it would be to lose every thing!"

Sternly the young man motioned to them both to

quit the room. Chisholm placed a card on the table with his address, and whispered to his wife, as he led her to the door:

"Let it work, and say no more! He will come down anon."

The two passed out without a word. Only the woman turned an imploring glance backward. But Reginald saw it not. His arms were thrown on the table; his face was buried in his hands.

CHAPTER XIII.

FOR SCOTLAND.

AFTER twilight had come on, Frank Ralston turned from his long walk, and found Reginald in the same attitude of despair. He was alarmed seriously, when the young man lifted a white and haggard face, with eyes suffused as if bloodshot, and seemed scarcely to hear his friend's repeated entreaties to know what was the matter. Then he wiped the great drops from his forehead, and pressed it with both hands, before he was able to give any clear account of what had happened.

Reginald had no idea of concealment. If the fearful tale to which he had listened were true, there was but one course for him. But the shock had thrown him off his balance for the time.

He gave Frank a full recital of the story told him by Chisholm and his wife. He placed the papers they had brought as evidence in his hands. He wanted the help of his clear judgment, not to determine his course if the truth had been disclosed, but to ascertain if it were the truth.

The letter of Lady Estonbury contained her own narration, which fully sustained that of her maid and the steward. She confessed the fraud practiced, by the imposition of a boy not hers on her husband as his heir, leaving his own daughter to be brought up as the child of Mr. and Mrs. Chisholm. She added her solemn oath to confirm this statement, and excused her conduct by dwelling on the cruel usage received from her husband, and his threats of some terrible calamity and disgrace hanging over her if she could not gratify his wish for an heir to his title and estates.

He had once said that if her child should not be a boy, he would know where to find an heir, of his own blood, too; and Lady Estonbury had been terrified by apprehensions of a previous marriage. She had known there was some mystery in his life, she said; and dreaded its revelation. Hardly any woman in her case, she thought, would have scrupled to act as she did.

She added, that she naturally shrunk from a public disclosure of these facts, and the blame that would be heaped on her. If Reginald would become the husband of her daughter, all should be buried in oblivion forever. If he refused, she would at once communicate with Maurice Howard, a distant cousin of the late marquis. He had seen Helen and greatly admired her. She would make her the wife of the true heir.

An exclamation of scorn escaped Reginald more than once during the reading of this letter. "In any case," he said, "ought I not to be thankful, Frank, that such a woman never gave me birth?"

"I should think so, indeed," returned young Ralston.

"But am I much better off," his friend murmured, with a groan of anguish, "to be the son of Chisholm and his wife?"

"I do not believe it! I cannot believe it!" cried the Scot, springing up and pacing the room.

"I now see clearly many things that have always seemed mysteries to me! The man, Chisholm, seemed to have secret power, of some sort, over Lady Estonbury. I have noted it on several occasions. She bore everything from him, and that nourished his native insolence till it became unbearable. Then, her infatuation for the girl, Helen. And she—she was too refined, pure and gentle for such parentage! It always seemed so to me."

"What do you mean to do, my boy?" asked Frank, after a long silence. "It seems to me transportation would be too good for these pliant tools of my lady."

"If they are punished she must be! I know not how the law would deal with them."

"Apparently, fear of punishment leads her ladyship to propose the alternative: marriage with her daughter, and undisturbed possession of the title and estates."

"It would seem so; else why should she be willing to wed her daughter to one of low birth—the child of menials in her employ?" said Reginald, with a moan he could not suppress.

"She counts on your unwillingness to relinquish all! And the girl is gentle! bears the impress of her noble birth! Would grace a title! Reginald, have you weighed the matter?"

Reginald looked him in the face, his noble soul flashing in his eyes.

"Weighed the proposal, do you mean? Ralston, do you think I would give one thought, for one instant, to such a proposition?"

"It would be a temptation to most men."

"If I am not the rightful heir to the marquessate do you think I would wear the title another hour? If Maurice Howard is the real and lawful Marquis of Estonbury, could I be bribed to defraud him of his rights?"

Frank grasped his friend's hand, and pressed it warmly between both his own.

"You shall go with me to Scotland, and we will consult my father. All this may be a falsehood; a trap; a conspiracy."

"It may be; and I must have other advice. I must see my solicitors at once. They will examine those people; will see Lady Estonbury; will hunt up such evidence as can be found. They have my interest at heart, and they will cleave to me as long as there is ground on which to stand."

"I should let the affair go to the courts for decision."

"Perhaps there will be no need of that. I would avoid unnecessary publicity. I would spare the guilty woman; ay, and her tools. I cannot bear the thought—but, Frank—they may be my parents!"

"Never! A nature so noble, so high and pure as yours, never was inherited from such people!"

"I confess my mind revolts against the idea. The loss of title and estates would be a less calamity, in my estimation."

"See your solicitors, my boy, in the morning, and leave the affair in their hands. You must go with me to Scotland."

"How can I go?" groaned Reginald again covering his face. "Ah, there is the bitterness of worse than death!"

"I understand you. Say nothing to the lady of your love till all is decided."

"But, how can I see her, and wear for a moment honors that may not be rightfully my own? And how can I breathe the same air and not hasten to throw myself at her feet?"

"If she really cares for you the loss of fortune ought to make no difference."

"Frank, you talk like a school-boy. Do you imagine that the Baron of Swinton would tolerate the suit, or even the presence, of one in my strait? Ah! I was so proud! I was glad my love was of ancient and high lineage, for it matched my own. I despised poor Helen, thinking her born of such base blood as mine may prove to be!"

The agony with which these words were uttered touched Ralston's heart. He renewed his importunities, and obtained at last a promise from Reginald that he would go with him to his northern home.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE OUTLAWED KNIGHT.

The ancient mansion of Stone Crag was enlivened with unusual gayety. The hospitality of its lord was claimed by Sir Victor Wilder, who was suspected in all the neighborhood of having matrimonial intentions.

The baron was not ignorant of his admiration for the beautiful Alicia; though as yet not a word had been spoken to him on the subject. The gentleman's father had been an old friend, and on that score the young man was always welcome.

Yet, Sir Victor was not a companion at all to Swinton's taste. He cared nothing for hunting, which was the elder man's passion; he abhorred the hounds, and was not fond of riding. Rather effeminate was he, and careful to a degree of his perfumed and well-dressed person. Tall and finely formed, with delicate features and a complexion white as milk, with tawny curling hair and beard, he was wont to bestow much time every day, with his valet's assistance, on an elaborate toilet. He breakfasted often in his room; and rarely joined the early morning meal of the baron and his daughter.

About noon he would enter the drawing-room or library, with the grace of one used to society, and spend hours toying with the silks and worsteds in the embroidery basket of his fair hostess, or in poring over newspapers that had come by the last post.

Or he would walk on the terrace, if he saw Alicia there, shiver in the crisp breeze, or praise the delightful coolness of the weather, and sometimes entice her to an arbor, where, throwing himself on the grass at her feet, he would read aloud, from a book of new poems, selections which he gave with really fine elocution.

This was ever agreeable to Alicia, who loved poetry dearly. Sometimes her guest would beg her to practice duets with him. He had a splendid tenor voice, and had cultivated it with assiduous care. Such accomplishments had always secured to Sir Victor Wilder the especial favor of the fair sex.

A strong contrast with this courtly gallant was the rude, uncultured, yet really handsome young savage, Herrick Maur. He had arrived that same night, weary and anxious; had refused to sup with the family, and had retired to the suit of rooms prepared for his occupancy. These were exactly similar to those of Sir Victor, but on the opposite side of the corridor; they were furnished, too, in the same manner; for the baron had determined to treat the young man with the respect due to his heir, and if possible to win his affection.

Early as Swinton had descended to the morning repast, Herrick had already left the house. The groom said he had come himself to the stables, saddled his horse and rode away, leaving no message. The housekeeper said he had declined to wait for breakfast.

The baron ordered his own horse early, announcing his intention to ride over and see what had been the result of the contest between Kenneth's retainers and the government men.

He went first to the hut in the hawthorn dell among the larches. Matlin was there, with the village surgeon, who had just pronounced an unfavorable opinion in the case of the wounded officer. He was sinking fast; but retained his faculties clearly.

His description of the man who he persisted in saying had caused his fall from the cliff led to the recognition of the so-called chief, Kenneth Maur, as the assailant. Two or three official persons from the nearest village had come to take the dying man's testimony, and the magistrate, Sir George Vaughan, had issued a warrant for his apprehension.

The old castle was full of soldiers, but Sir Kenneth and his two body servants were missing. Even the housekeeper had disappeared. Search was made for them by mounted constables, who scoured the country.

The castle was thoroughly searched. The fire that

had broken out, and the stormy riot of that night of confusion, had left a portion of the walls a blackened and shattered ruin; without repairing, it was hardly a fit habitation even for the rough men to whom it had been a home.

The soldiers in possession had spent hours in drunken carousals, and had stripped the best rooms of many modern articles of furniture, leaving the massive and grimy cabinets and tables, the tattered tapestry, and the pewter flagons and dishes, as not worth plunder.

When the baron arrived, he consulted with Vaughan, and orders were given to dispossess these vagrants, and to secure the doors and windows against ingress; as the few of the household who were left refused to remain there, unprovided for and unpaid. They were not long in scattering in different directions.

No trace of the smugglers' goods was found; but the cave was discovered and ransacked; without any result, as the goods had been carried off. There was no danger, however, of a renewal of the illegal imports for a long time to come.

The baron came upon Herrick, wandering, like a lost spirit, about his former home, and mournful of countenance, as one who had been bereaved of all.

His father had left a letter for him with one of his retainers. He bade his son accept the protection of his kinsman, the baron, and live henceforth with him. Heir of the dignities of that ancient house, he had a just claim to the future provision he needed. Swinton had made offers, which he would now fulfill. Kenneth forbade his son to follow him abroad, or attempt to discover his retreat. He should stay away for the present; and in case of the death of the revenue officer, he could never return. Herrick would hear from him at intervals through Mat the seer, and he was earnestly counseled to leave his former associates and ways, and fit himself, under his kinsman's guidance, for such society as befitted his future rank, etc.

Herrick showed this letter to the baron, who added his own advice to follow its counsel, and gave the youth the warmest assurances of his affection and a son's welcome to his house and heart.

"You are my nearest of kin, and must come into all I have when I am gone," he added. "I have had an interest in you, boy, from your birth; you well know that. I shall regard you as a son, Alicia will be a sister to you, and I look to you to be her guardian and protector when she loses me!"

A deep flush swept over the young man's face, at the allusion to the maiden he loved with an untamed passion. But he did not turn from her father's kindly proffers, grasping his hand in token of his gratitude in accepting them.

That night and the following Herrick was quartered at the castle, where he had an interview with Matlin. The wounded revenue officer was dead.

The constables were still in search of Kenneth, whose fate was sealed in the event of his capture.

"Be counseled, my lad," said the faithful friend, "and leave this neighborhood. The baron's house is your home. Go to England, if he sends you to a university, and set foot no more in Scotland. The people murmur since this lawless deed, and may visit it upon you."

But the young man persisted in being present at the coroner's inquest, held in the inn of the seacoast village. Sir George Vaughan, as magistrate, presided, and several of the neighbors were called as witnesses.

One man had seen the deceased walking toward the cliff, with a telescope in his hand; another had met Sir Kenneth coming home and had noticed that he was pale and excited. He had passed the man without a word, and quickened his pace as he went on. Others testified to Matlin's strange language in the vision; but hearsay evidence availed nothing. The seer himself was sworn. He was unconscious of his words when the second sight came to overpower his senses; and if he had remembered the vision, it could hardly have been taken by the magistrate. Matlin deposed to having heard Hilda call for assistance, and, on descending the rocks, to have found her with the injured man. She craved his aid to carry him up, and he had taken him to his own dwelling. His best skill was taxed to help him and bind up his bruises. He added a full account of what had been done for him.

The village doctor gave his testimony that the man had come to his death by the breaking of his ribs in the fall, and consequent pressure on the lungs, and impeded action of the heart. The dying deposition was read, and other corroborative testimony taken. The flight of Kenneth, Gregory and Hilda was convincing proof crowning all the rest, of the chief's guilt.

Herrick, to whom suspicion had attached, was cleared by the testimony of persons who had seen him, at that very hour, at a distance of two miles from the spot. The presence and support of the baron stood him in good stead. No father could have more cordially sustained his own son in circumstances of peril. Swinton had feared it would be necessary for Alicia to give her testimony, but the young man was completely cleared without it.

Calm, stern and haughty, careless of aught that might happen to himself, stood Herrick during the examination. When it was over, he strode out of the inn, and walked briskly away. But he returned before the verdict of the jury was rendered.

The guilt of "willful murder" was fixed on Kenneth Maur, and orders were issued for his arrest and commitment to prison whenever he could be found. It was now certain that he had left the country; but no one knew whither the vessel had sailed. One conjecture pointed to France as the refuge of the criminal.

The people dispersed, murmuring and divided in their opinions and feelings.

Herrick was led away by the baron, who entreated him to ride home to Stone Crag without delay, which he lingered to transact some business with Sir George Vaughan.

CHAPTER XV.

A YOUNG SAVAGE'S ANGER.

TWILIGHT had crept over the heavens when Herrick dismounted at Stone Crag, and led his steed to the stables. He was accustomed to attend himself to the animal's wants; and he shook out the bundle of hay, fed him with handfuls of oats, and gave him drink at the trough, which the groom had filled with fresh water. Then he went in at the gates, and entering at the front door, which stood hospitably open, passed through the hall and ascended the grand stairway.

He entered the room on the first floor to the right, supposing it to be his own; though in reality it was that of the English baronet.

The apartments, as we have said, were furnished alike. Herrick crossed the parlor toward the interior room, the door of which was ajar. He was buried in thought and did not notice that some one was speaking within. He was in his road-stained riding-gear, and in haste to change it for more seemly attire, before seeking his fair cousin.

A light was burning in the dressing-room he entered. A silver lamp of antique fashion stood on the table, and near a black oak carved chest of drawers surmounted by a swing-glass, reclined in an easy-chair a figure wrapped in a luxurious silk dressing-gown. The elegant baronet, seated so that he could see himself in the mirror, was having his hair perfumed and brushed carefully by his valet.

"The curls on this side—a little more on the temple," he drawled, languidly, indicating a different course for the brush. "Ha, who is this?"

He turned to encounter the petrified gaze of Herrick, who had never seen him before. He had advanced some paces, and stood perfectly still. The valet, brush in hand, faced him as he turned.

"Oh, one of the servants! What a rough set these fellows are!" again drawled the baronet, looking at Herrick. "No ceremony in coming in upon one! Has your master returned, my good fellow, and sent you with a message?"

Herrick made no reply.

"It must be the groom, for he smells horribly of the stables!" continued the dainty gentleman. "Hand me my smelling-bottle. Do you know, my man, my horse and I do not room together? Has he gone lame of a sudden? Faugh!" And he applied the salts with vigor to his nostrils.

"Who are you?" demanded the young man, "and what are you doing in my room?"

"In your room? Are these the servants' quarters?"

"They are mine, and I will have nothing of this trumpery stuff about!" cried the savage, as he strode to the table, and was about to sweep off it the entire paraphernalia of glasses, vials, gallipots, brushes and other implements of the toilet. But the valet interfered, and rudely bade him begone; that room was his master's—Sir Victor Wilder's, and the baron should be informed of this unseemly intrusion.

Herrick had a riding-whip in his hand, and had lifted it to chastise the fellow's insolence, when it suddenly flashed upon him that the apartment was not his own. He remembered having turned to the right instead of the left, at the head of the stairway.

"I have made a mistake," he muttered. "My rooms are opposite."

"No offense—no offense at all!" said the baronet, who had risen at the new-comer's first hostile demonstration. "Only better manners in future! Such bores abound in this country, I suppose!"

Herrick glared at him in increasing disgust.

"You may go; you need not apologize. I shall not complain to your master. Here!" and taking a half-guinea piece from his vest pocket, he threw it on the table, on the corner near which the stranger stood.

Herrick's eyes flashed fire. He picked up the money, and flung it with all his force in the baronet's face; then turned with a fierce execration, and strode out of the room.

"In the name of all that's wonderful!" exclaimed the dandy, rubbing his cheek, on which the coin had inflicted a sharp blow, "what does this mean? Who is the fellow?"

The valet, who had peeped after the stranger, as he entered the room across the corridor, came stepping softly back.

"I think you have made a mistake, too, master. Yonder man is not a servant."

"No? and what does he here, in coarse fustian, and smelling so? Faugh! Raise the window, Coelebs. Who is he?"

"I have heard the servants talk of a young rustic, a cousin of my lord of Swinton, come to stay here," replied the valet. "There was a great riot three or four days ago, at the sea-coast, and a murder done, and my lord of Swinton was to sit with the magistrates in judgment on the rioters."

"And this is one of them? Belike it is; for he has the snarl of a surly bulldog."

"Nay, Sir Victor, this is the young cousin they expected."

"A cousin of the baron's? And I gave him half a guinea!" exclaimed the young Englishman. "But 'twas well meant; and he was a boor and a savage to fling it at me in such a rage! Bathe my cheek in cold water, Coelebs, or I shall have an unbecoming flush all the evening. Where is the man gone?"

"Into his own quarters."

"Finish me directly, that I may explain this

blunder to the fair Alicia. There; my hair will do. Have you brushed the velvet of my coat?"

"It is ready, Sir Victor."

"Help me on with it. Very awkward, this; but the young lady will excuse a mistake. Hal! hal! hal! it was laughable, though. How was I to recognize a gentleman in such clothes, and with such an odor? Faugh!"

His toilet was by this time made. He passed a creamy silken handkerchief across his forehead, adjusted the cluster diamond ring on his finger, glanced once more in the mirror, and went out. The corridor was deserted, and only lighted by the lamp that swung in the great hall below. The baronet descended the stairs with his usual composed grace, and went into the great drawing-room, where Alicia was practicing the harpsichord.

While the valet picked up the half-guinea and placed the dressing-room in order for his master's disrobing, Herrick, in the opposite room, was giving vent to his ferocious temper, chafed to fury by the indignity of being treated as a servant in his kinsman's house, by the fop of an Englishman he already detested.

He now recollected that a young baronet from the South was the guest of Swinton, and also the surmise that he had come to pay court to the young lady of the mansion. This was the point that galled him sorely. What scenes of anguish he had passed through, with suddenly ruptured ties; a father hounded by minions of the law, and self-exiled; a home made desolate! And while he groaned under this bitter experience, here was a dainty, roseate gallant, who had to have a valet to curl and perfume his hair, paying court to the girl he loved! ay, the girl who had sworn to love none but himself!

By all the Druids of the groves, it should not be! He would spoil this miscreant's game! He would speak at once with Alicia!

With impetuous haste, he threw off his soiled garments, performed the necessary ablutions, and donned the suit he called his best. But he never once looked in the mirror; for it was not his habit to indulge in such contemplation. His thoughts ran upon his dainty, fresh-cheeked rival, who had dared talk of his "smelling of the stables," and he wondered if it were possible a silly maid could be pleased with such foppery. He clenched his hand; he could then and there have torn the exquisite to atoms. He strode to the head of the stairway.

Sounds of music came up from the drawing-room, and presently the mingled voices of two, singing a duet. The notes rose and fell, and the feminine trills were lost in a clear, manly tone. Then a light laugh was heard; Alicia's laugh! The drawing tones of the Englishman, with his strongly-marked Southern accent, could be heard, too; and then the laugh was mutual.

Herrick could bear no more. He dashed down the stairs at a breakneck pace; rushed to the front door, and out into the air. The night was clear, soft and balmy, and the moon, like a silver boat, rode the clear hyaline. As the young man hurled himself down the stone steps upon the terrace, the tramp of a horse approached, and the baron, leaping to the ground, flung his rein to the groom, who had gone out to watch for him.

"Who is this?" he called out, as he saw his young kinsman's figure dimly defined in the uncertain light. "Herrick! is it you, my boy? Have you but now arrived? What ails thee, lad?" as he came near enough to grasp his arm, and saw him turn aside with a scowl, and felt that he was trembling with strong emotion.

"Nothing!" answered the young man to the question, after it had been twice repeated.

"Tell me not that, boy!" cried his kinsman; "and hide naught from me. Have you not seen my daughter?"

"No, I have not! She wants none of my sort," was the sullen answer.

"Some one has chafed you, and sorely, too! Yet Alicia is not in fault; she knows not of your coming! Take my arm; we will go to find her."

"No, I cannot!" returned the young man, drawing away his arm. "I will not go in. I will away to-night."

"Whither, I pray?"

"Home; to the sea; to the ruined castle my friends have deserted! If I find no shelter there—there is the sea; and the rocks! I can hide in their caves till I learn whither my father has fled, and then go to him!"

"You shall not leave my house," cried the baron, again seizing his arm. "You are half frenzied, boy, and I wonder not; but what has chanced here to anger you? Hath any of my boors been saucy? If he has, he shall reap a heavy chastisement!"

"No, no!" answered the young man, endeavoring to release himself.

"They had better not chafe you! Art you not my own blood? Come, come; this is some misunderstanding."

"I cannot go in," muttered Herrick, "to be measured with you fop of an Englishman, and despised because I am not one of his sort."

"Despised? Who dares despise thee?"

"He does, and his minion of a valet. I chanced but now to enter his room by mistake, while the cub was perfuming his master's hair, and scenting his kerchief with rose-water; and he—your guest, baron—railed at me as a boor to a servant; said I smelt of the stables; put a bottle to his nose, and then flung a piece of gold at me, as if I were one of the varlets born to wait on such as he!"

"Tush; 'twas a blunder of his! He would never dare maltreat one of my kinsmen, or a guest. He is strange to our customs. Come in, and he shall apologize."

"Nay, it was matter of jest afterward between the fop and your lady daughter. I heard them laughing."

"But not at you, cousin! That is impossible. Alicia Maur could never be guilty of a rudeness. Come; you slander her by such a thought; and wound me—seriously too! You must make reparation. Come with me."

He drew the young man on to the stone steps.

"Nay, I think the lady wants none of my company while you sweet-smelling gallant—"

"Art jealous? That is unworthy of a Maur. Sir Victor Wilder is nothing to her; but she is bound to show him courtesy as my guest."

"Then they wrong her by the talk in the village."

"Fie, cousin! Wouldst listen to boors and gossips, that aye spear into the ways of their betters? Come; I will teach you better!"

They were in the house by this time.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE COUSIN'S WOOING.

THE light and elegance of the drawing-room—a refreshment to the baron after his long ride—acted as an irritant to the wild, uncultivated youth at his side.

Alicia and Sir Victor were still playing; but the music ceased on the instant; the girl ran to embrace her father, and gave her hand in cordial greeting to Herrick. He barely touched her fingers; then turned away, with a sullen scowl on his brow.

Baron Swinton took his kinsman by the hand and personally introduced him to Sir Victor Wilder as his cousin, the heir of his name and the estate, and his favored friend.

Herrick did not even bend his head in acknowledgment; but the faultlessly-attired gentleman he so disdained came forward with the grace only acquired by familiarity with the best society, offered his hand frankly, and expressed his pleasure in making the acquaintance of a relation of their noble host; one, too, of whose courage and gallant bearing he had heard so much. There was a charm in his perfect good-breeding, and the apparent sincerity of his compliments, which deprived Herrick of the power to repel his advances. He felt and succumbed to the spell; but in the depth of his heart he was conscious of a new fountain of jealous bitterness.

The young baronet added that he felt himself constrained to offer an humble apology, for the stupid blunder he had been betrayed into, some little time ago. In the dim twilight, seeing a stranger enter his room in riding gear, he had absurdly mistaken him for one of the baron's attendants, and had been guilty of the rudeness of addressing him as such. Would Master Herrick Maur pardon him? He could not pardon himself!

Herrick was taken by surprise. The humility of the address, the self-reproach it implied, the appeal to his generous forgiveness, quite disarmed him. He was new to the ways of society-bred people, and did not understand how so much self-abasement might yet consist with arrogance.

Then, too, it was plain Alicia had heard nothing of the occurrence. She came forward with questions and showed genuine surprise. He had wronged Sir Victor, by supposing he had been made an object of ridicule between the two.

Herrick answered frankly that he was quite satisfied, and that there was no cause of offense. His brow cleared, and he smiled good-humoredly when the baron bade him lead in his fair cousin to supper.

The evening passed very agreeably; and Herrick was forced to acknowledge to himself, though reluctantly, that the fluent conversation and graceful ease of the English gentleman contributed vastly to the pleasure of the circle.

The baron conversed almost exclusively with him on subjects they understood in common; but Alicia was inevitably engrossed by the accomplished gallant who had so much power to arouse them all by his piquant stories and sallies of wit. Even his drawing manner, so offensive at times, added point to his playful satire, or his graphic sketches.

Then he went to the harpsichord with the young lady, and they played and sung in concert. Sir Victor had a rich and cultivated voice, and a superior knowledge of music.

Herrick relapsed into his moody abstraction, paying no heed to the discourse of his host. He watched the pair furtively. He had naught else to do; for he knew none of the parlor games then in fashion; had no gift for music, and could not join in the conversation. The consciousness of his own deficiencies stung him to the heart. He rose and paced the room uneasily, stopping now and then at the windows, to look out upon the moonlighted lawn.

Presently Margaret came in. She always mingled as an equal with the visitors of her young foster-sister, and was entirely capable of joining in the general conversation, though not accomplished in any special way.

She was introduced to the young stranger—Herrick—and essayed to draw him into discourse; but found it impracticable. Alicia at length perceived his discomposure, and went to him. But even her gentle wiles failed to restore him to good-humor.

They stood by a window, which opened from the floor upon a narrow balcony. Without asking leave, Herrick drew aside the fastenings and threw it wide open.

"Come out here!" he said, brusquely. "The air is insufferably close."

He drew Alicia out on the balcony and closed the window. The air was chill, and the girl shivered from head to foot.

"I must go in," she said, "or get a shawl."

"You shall not go in," exclaimed her impetuous kinsman. "Let me put my coat over you, if you are cold. I will keep you here; I have had no chance of speaking to you."

Alicia laughed as she declined the heavy coat he

would have put on her; and tapped lightly at the window. Margaret came, and she made a sign to her.

In a few minutes Margaret came and opened the window, giving Alicia a warm cloak, which she threw over her shoulders.

"Now, cousin, I am at your service," she said, pleasantly.

"Come down, then," said the young man, and he led her to the steps at the end of the balcony, descending to the terrace.

She took his arm confidently, and they walked on till they came to the cluster of acacias. There was a rustic seat, sheltered by the drooping blossoms. The girl threw herself upon it.

"It is pleasant in the open air," she remarked, "with the smell of the flowers, and the moon so bright. We will stop a few minutes."

"Stay with me as long as you can, Alicia," returned Herrick, "for I cannot go back."

"Why not?"

"I suffer too much."

"Ah, truly, my poor cousin! You cannot feel gay, after such sad things have happened, and we are too apt to forget them in our enjoyment. Believe me, I feel truly for you."

"You do not feel; you do not care for me, Alicia!" cried the young man, bitterly. "You have eyes and hearing only for yon sleek coxcomb!"

"Cousin Herrick!"

"I must speak as I feel! and I am miserable! I cannot bear it! Why was I brought here to meet him?"

"You are unreasonable. He is my father's visitor. He came unexpectedly; at least, my father had short notice of his coming."

"Is this the first time?"

"That he has been here? Yes; but papa has been often entertained at his father's, in England."

"Comes he not as a suitor?"

"A suitor—for what?"

"You need not pretend not to know what I mean. A suitor for your hand?"

The girl burst out laughing.

"What a strange notion! He has no such idea, I assure you!"

"I assure you he has; and he expects to win you as his bride!" exclaimed the young man, with a burst of jealous anger.

"Herrick! you are discourteous! I will not hear such language!" replied the maiden, rising from her seat.

"Is it not plain enough? I have seen his eyes follow you with admiring looks; I have seen you hang upon his words, as if delighted. I tell you, he has come to woo you, Alicia; and I tell you, too, there is danger in him for you! A maiden's love is soon won by such arts as he can practice!"

With grave displeasure, the girl turned to retrace her steps to the house.

Herrick caught her arm.

"You shall not leave me, Alicia, chafed and tortured as I am! Have you no pity?"

"You are rude and ill-mannered; nay, let me go!"

Herrick threw his arms round her; she struggled to release herself, and stood free, save that he still clutched her dress.

"Oh, Alicia, drive me not to madness! I love you—you know I love you!"

"You are too wild and fierce, sir. Do not prevent me from going! You have no right to speak to me in this manner!"

"Alicia, do you not remember a few nights since—at the castle—"

"Yes, Herrick; and it is my recollection of the service you rendered me that makes me bear with you now. You saved my life, and I am grateful! oh, so grateful! I was indeed in a terrible strait!"

"My father's bidding then was that you and I should be wed that night."

The girl gave a gasp of horror.

"Yes, the priest was ready; but I would not have it so; because, girl, I would not take advantage of your helplessness and fears; I would not take an unwilling bride."

"You acted nobly, Herrick. You have a noble heart!"

She put out her hand, and it was clasped passionately.

"Do you remember the promise you made, Alicia?"

"The promise!"

"Yes, the promise; you cannot have forgotten it. You swore solemnly to fulfill it."

The girl grew pale as death.

"Every word is burned in upon her heart!" cried Herrick. "If I would come with you, you swore to wed no other man."

"Cousin Herrick! would you hold me to words uttered in such a strait?"

"Yes, I would! I do! You knew what you were saying! You must be mine, Alicia, or be forsworn!"

"Nay, I made no promise to wed you nor any one," faltered the girl, trying to release her hands from his burning clasp.

"But to wed none other without my leave! I shall hold you to that. You are fast bound!"

"I do not expect to be married."

"Is there no man in the world you prefer to me?"

The maid could not prevaricate.

"You are talking nonsense. Let us quit the subject. Come into the house."

"To see you smooth, creamy-faced gallant make love to you! Never!"

"How can I convince you that he has no such thought? That I have not?"

"Would you accept him, Alicia?"

"Most certainly not. He is not the man whom I could ever love."

"Or encourage him?"

"surely not; that would be unmaidenly, unjust, dishonorable!"

"Alicia, I will be satisfied, if you will here and now declare that you will marry me."

"But I cannot."

"I will not be in haste; you shall have months, years of freedom. I will educate myself in the arts that please you; I will cast off the savage and become as courtly and refined as you wish; I will transform my wild nature! Only, Alicia, give me your love in return for the love I lay at your feet!"

"Herrick, you ask what I cannot do. You are our kinsman, dear to my father and to me; you are as a brother."

"I will not be your brother. You shall be my wife, Alicia."

"I will be no man's wife whom I cannot love as a husband."

"And you have never seen one you love better than me? Your heart is untouched? I will win it by such devotion, such deep love as never yet was scorned by maiden fair! You cannot help loving me! Only give me time. Have naught to say to this English fop!"

"You are foolish, Herrick, to be jealous of Sir Victor! Were there no other man in the world, I would not take him for a bridegroom."

"You will swear that?"

"There is no need of swearing; he could never win favor from me. Yet I must be civil to him as my father's guest."

"And when he lays his title and fortune at your feet, girl, you will tell him you are betrothed to your cousin?"

"Not quite that; but indeed he has no such intent. Be reasonable, Herrick, and believe me."

"If you will not say that you are my betrothed, Alicia, I will watch the young man; and if I see in him the air of a favored suitor—the worse for him!"

"You then question my word?"

"No, I cling to it; your promise to be the wife of no other man."

"Will you come to the house?"

She was shivering, less from cold than fear of the rashness and impetuous passion of this wild kinsman. She leaned on his arm, and thus drew him to the steps, entering at the front door.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE MEETING BY THE ROMAN WELL.

ALICIA was mistaken about the disposition of Sir Victor Wilder.

His proposal was made in due form to the baron a few days after the occurrences described.

The daughter was sent for to the library, where the suitor had conferred with her father. Swinton left the decision entirely to the young lady.

She at once, and unhesitatingly, declined the honor proffered. She had no love for the English baronet; she could never love him. He would be too kind, too noble, to pursue her with claims or solicitations, after such a revelation of her mind.

Sir Victor had no idea of doing so. He accepted her decision as final. He spoke gracefully of Herrick Maur, whom he supposed his fortunate rival. He offered important services for the benefit of that young man. His father could exert influence to get him into the army. There, thrown into contact with men of distinction in society, high breeding, and solid acquisitions, he would soon lose his rough manner, and become refined and educated. Should he write at once to his father?

Both the baron and his daughter were affected by this generosity. But Miss Maur hastened to explain that Sir Victor was in error in fancying the young man destined to be her husband. He was their kinsman; the heir of the house; that was all.

"Then you must permit me to do him service as your kinsman, if he will accept it at my hands?"

This offer was thankfully accepted; and the rejected lover went to his own room to write his letters. Alicia retreated before her father could enter upon any discussion of the subject. The prospect of having Herrick sent away to the army, where he might learn the accomplishments of a gentleman, was gratifying to both.

Taking her scarf and bonnet, with a book in her hand, Alicia went out to walk alone. She carefully avoided passing where her cousin might see her, and shunned even Margaret's company. She wanted solitude to indulge thoughts she would confide to no friendly sympathy.

About a mile from the mansion was the ancient Roman well of which mention has been made. These relics of the Roman conquest in Scotland were curiosities tourists often came to see. The well had a rounded mouth built of solid stone, and was in depth from thirty to forty feet. There was a narrow stair from the mouth to the bottom, where the water was dipped up; and bronze statues in the niches were seen as one descended. The statue of Mercury, nearest the water, was still entire, and not even the element that bathed the feet of the god had power to crumble them.

Alicia seated herself in a grove where the short, thick grass grew luxuriantly under the shade. The rocks in the vicinity showed it the ancient resort of Druid worshippers.

The girl leaned her head upon her hand, and gave herself up to thought.

Steps were approaching, but she heard them not. They came through the grove. A manly figure stepped out from the shelter of the wild vines that clustered among the branches, and swung at the bidding of the winds.

Suddenly the stranger started, and almost recoiled. He had not expected to find the girl there.

He stood still a moment, gazing eagerly at her. Her book had fallen from her hand; her head drooped so that her face was concealed. But Reginald, the young lover, recognized her at the first glance.

He had not intended to seek her presence. A guest at Laird Ralston's house, not many miles distant, he had walked over to be in the neighborhood of Stone Crag, not meaning to present himself as a visitor to the baron. Should the opportunity occur, he would have informed him of his sad change of fortune. Alicia he thought of as a star that had beamed on his life, now quenched forever in the gloom that had engulfed him.

He could not see her face, but the outline of her form showed dejection. She was sorrowing; could it be a memory of him that had caused her pain? With a deep sigh he turned away, and prepared to retrace his steps. Some light movement, perhaps the breaking of a twig, startled her. She sprang up, and as the young man turned once more, they were face to face.

"Lord Cressy!" the girl exclaimed, calling him by the courtesy-title belonging to the eldest son of the Marquis of Estonbury—by which she had known him.

A lovely rose-color suffused her face. She came forward and put out her hand.

He took it and lifted it to his lips. For his life he could not have avoided doing that; and she did not draw her hand away, though she blushed yet more deeply.

"You are glad to see me again, Alicia?" he asked; and a tenderness in his tone went to her heart.

But she answered lightly: "You know we are! Papa has missed you so! and you left us in such haste—"

She stopped, for her eyes fell on his mourning garb, and she remembered that she had heard he was Lord Estonbury.

He led her back to the moss-covered seat she had quitted.

"But you will go home with me? You were on your way. Papa will be so glad to welcome his companion in the chase."

"I cannot go with you, Miss Maur. You must make my excuses to your father."

"Cannot go? Why, have you not come purposely to make papa a visit? He told me he had heard from you."

"I expected to visit him when I wrote; it was my dearest hope to see you again. But so much has happened since—"

"Oh, you have heard of it? Our kinsman, Kenneth Maur, has fled from the country; his castle is desolate, and his son Herrick—my father's old favorite, you know—is here, living with us. You heard about all this?"

"No, I heard nothing of it. Is that the young cousin whose hands I once rescued you from, Alicia? He was something of a boor."

"The same; and he is not greatly changed," she replied, laughing. "After his father's departure, he had no other home and papa wishes him to live with us."

"The changes in my life, Alicia, are greater than these."

"I have heard of your father's death," the girl said, looking grave as she saw the sudden gloom that overspread the face of her companion.

"That is not all. When I saw you last, Alicia—suffer me to call you so yet, till my story is told—I had everything to hope; now I have nothing but despair!"

The anguish that convulsed his features moved her very soul.

"Despair!" she repeated, growing pale.

Reginald struggled with overpowering emotion for a moment. When he spoke his voice was altered and husky.

"I must tell you all! I did not mean it; but fate has brought us together, and it is for the last time! Oh, Alicia, you see me stripped of fortune, title, everything, to which I thought my birth entitled me. I am not the son and heir of Lord Estonbury!"

"Not his son!" echoed the girl in amazement.

"Lady Estonbury says so. She commanded me to marry her adopted daughter, Helen—the child, as I supposed, of her maid and the house-steward. I refused. After my departure, she sent the two servants to London, to inform me that Helen and I had been exchanged in infancy; that I was the son of Chisholm and the maid—"

"Impossible!" exclaimed Alicia. "Why should Lady Estonbury put from her own child?"

"She pleads that her husband was so anxious for a son, that he held over her mysterious threats, if the expected child were not a boy; that she was afraid of his revenge; and thought it better to deceive him than to suffer the alternative he had threatened. She has declared in writing—under the seal of an oath—that I am not her son, and that Helen is her own daughter!"

An exclamation of sympathy escaped the girl, and involuntarily she laid her hand upon Reginald's. It was infinitely grateful to him to note that her first impulse was one of kindness. He had feared that she would recoil from him with aversion.

"My friend Ralston," he continued, "suggested that there was still room for doubt of the truth of the story. Lady Estonbury has always shown a dislike of me, and a fondness for the girl which seemed unaccountable. In her disappointment at the failure of her attempt to make a match between us, Frank thought she might have invented the tale to mortify and injure me. So my solicitors thought."

"It must be so!" eagerly cried the maiden.

"Alas, no! I directed immediate search to be made, to substantiate Lady Estonbury's statements, in case they really had foundation. The steward and maid were carefully examined; also the doctor who had been called in at the birth of the child, whom he remembered to have been a girl. Other

testimony was brought to light; till no doubt remains of the truth of what has been told me."

Alicia averted her face to wipe away tears that stole down her white cheeks.

"You suffer for me! you weep for me, generous girl!" cried Reginald, impetuously. "What misfortune is not easily borne if your sympathy is mine! if you feel for me?"

"I do indeed!" said Alicia, with deep emotion. "You deserved all the good that fortune seemed to have showered upon you."

"I hoped I was not unworthy of it. And I will not be crushed. I have already taken steps to resign the wealth and state to which I have no claim. I have a few friends to stand by me, and their regard is true and steadfast. Already, I hear, the heir-at-law of the marquise has gone to Estonbury Court; and if the proofs are complete of the imposture practiced so long, I shall offer no opposition to his claim."

"Does my father know?"

"He does not; nothing is known as yet, beyond the persons I have mentioned."

"Tell him, Reginald. He will advise you. He will act for you. Come to him at once."

"Alicia, I cannot appeal to him!"

"Why not?"

"Because—he knew the hope I had cherished—the hope dearer than all else—he would fear that I—Alicia, forgive me! I meant to have kept the secret of my love, but I cannot hide it from you! I loved you—I love you still. It was the cherished dream of my life to call you mine! It is the darkest of all the calamities that have overtaken me, that I must lose that hope; that I must resign you forever!"

Alicia's face was crimson now. She covered it with both hands before she murmured the next words:

"Reginald, I knew you loved me!"

He looked at her; she lifted those frank, innocent eyes to his, and continued:

"I knew it—by my own feelings."

The young man caught both her hands in his. The tide of passion was too strong to be checked.

"Your own, Alicia? You knew my love, and you—gave me yours in return?"

She drew her hand from his clasp; but it was to dash away the falling tears.

"Why should I deny it? Why should I stoop to coquettish art? Yes—your love is returned, and with my whole heart!"

He clasped her closely in his arms. In that moment all was forgotten except the rush of ecstasy that swept over him.

He made her sit down and threw himself at her feet—holding her hand and kissing it again and again. Like a torrent long repressed the eloquence of ardent passion overswept sorrow, reason and all else. The girl listened, smiling even while her tears flowed.

Suddenly the reaction came.

"I am a villain!" the young man exclaimed, starting up. "How dare I proffer love, and forget that you are so far above me! What would the baron of Swinton think of such presumption in a penniless outcast?"

He struck his forehead with his hand and groaned in bitterness of spirit.

"Reginald!" cried the girl. "It is not your fortune and title that won me!"

"But you are lost to me, nevertheless. I cannot drag you down to my misery—my penury! What wickedness! that I—the beggar—the son of such parents—should have dared lift my eyes to you! to reveal the love it is a degradation to you to listen to!"

"Not so!" cried Alicia, rising, a noble spirit flashing in her eyes. "It is no degradation to be beloved by you, Reginald, and to love you! My father will not think so!"

"He would not—he could not—sanction my suit! Bestow his daughter on a landless vagrant! On one of menial birth!"

"You are not answerable for birth or fortune!" she replied. "You have been bred a gentleman; you are the same man as when my father welcomed and loved you. You shall be his guest again!"

"He will spurn me when he knows—"

"If he should," cried Alicia, "I will be true to you in spite of fortune, in spite of all the world!"

Again the impetuous lover folded the brave girl to his wildly-beating heart.

"Oh, if I dared cherish this generous assurance! If I could look forward to a blest future!" he exclaimed. "Angel that you are, why may I not cling to the hand that raises me from despair to happiness?"

"I am no angel, but a loving woman; and I will be true to you!" repeated Alicia.

Reginald went on rapidly:

"I may wring success from the world; I have talents, education, friends, and a field of labor! I must succeed, with such a reward awaiting me!"

"You will, I dare pledge my life!"

"I will not bear the name of Chisholm! I will never acknowledge the parents whose first act toward me was one of fraud and falsehood! But I will win a name—and a respected one; no great wealth, perhaps—but at least an honored name."

"And when you claim me, Reginald, I will share it with you, and bear the want of fortune with content!"

Alas! she had forgotten entirely her pledge to Herrick Maur.

At this moment the remembrance of that extorted promise flashed upon her; and pale as death, she recoiled, and would have fallen but for her lover's supporting arms.

"I have tasked your strength too far, dearest," he said, tenderly.

She shook her head but could not speak for some minutes.

"Reginald," she resumed, at length, "I have given you my whole heart, and death itself could not make me retract my word. But how is it with another sort of promise—one made under different circumstances—peril to life—or something more terrible—would a promise, extorted from one at such a time, be always binding?"

"I do not quite understand, dearest. A promise—of your love—do you mean?"

"No, not that! I could not promise what was not my own to give!"

She went on to narrate all that had occurred; her capture and forcible detention at the castle; her cousin's interference and release of her; her terror, and the dread of suffering imprisonment or outrage among the rough and savage retainers of Kenneth; her supplication for aid, and her final yielding to Herrick's condition—that she should swear to wed none without his acquiescence.

Reginald heard her to the end.

"And this man, you say, is now an inmate of your father's house?"

"He is, and recognized as my father's heir."

"He must be worse than a savage! He must have the instincts of a brute!"

"Has he a right to exact the fulfillment of such a promise?"

"Not the least in the world! If he had manly feeling he would never have asked it."

"But it was given—to save myself, and he has reminded me of it—and will hold me bound."

"Set yourself free at once! Tell him you repudiate such a pledge! Does he expect you to marry him?"

"I told him I would not; I could not love him."

"Yet he asserts a claim upon you?"

"Yes he insists upon the fulfillment of my promise; and, oh, Reginald, he is so fierce and violent, I dare not retract it!"

"This is weakness, dear Alicia. You must assert your freedom. What a churl—to know you cannot love him, yet so to impose on your goodness? If I were in a position to ask this dear hand of the baron, I would soon set him right."

Alicia's eyes sparkled.

"I will make an appeal to him," she said. "I will convince him how hopeless is his suit. He has something generous in his nature."

"And if he refuse to quit his absurd claim?"

"Then I will tell him I am free. No pledge so extorted can be justly exacted."

The lovers lingered yet awhile, and before they parted, Alicia received from Reginald the promise that he would see her father that evening.

"Tell him all," she implored. "I cannot bear to have secrets from him."

This was agreed. Reginald, too, would conceal nothing. He placed a rich antique ring on the girl's finger, and begged her to wear it for his sake.

"I dare not ask your troth-pledge, my beloved, till I am worthy of your father's approval."

"I have given it," she answered, "and shall never retract it nor fail you, Reginald."

CHAPTER XVIII. A ROUGH WOOER.

HERRICK was absent that evening when Reginald came to visit the Baron of Swinton.

His whole story was laid before him in the library before evening set in.

Swinton entirely approved of what he had resolved on, in case no more doubt remained of the truth of Lady Estonbury's statement; and referred him to a legal firm in Edinburgh, whose judgment in such matters was celebrated. They could be put in communication with the solicitors of the young man, to discuss all points of the question.

The baron offered all the aid he could command for the future course of his young friend. The law was open to him; it was a study worth the attention of any gentleman.

Reginald had already provided, with the help of the Laird of Ralston, for commencing his law studies. He would take chambers at once, and place himself under proper instruction.

Then the young man made a full confession of his love for the baron's daughter.

This point was a sensitive one for the father. He had perceived the affection ripening between the youthful pair, and, as long as Reginald could offer a splendid title and almost fabulous wealth he was inclined to foster that affection. But now it was different. He could not consent to his daughter's union with one poor and unknown; one, too, whose birth was unsuitable. He was ambitious; his child must marry in her own station. It grieved him to be severe; but he could sanction no engagement nor correspondence.

Reginald had not a word to say. How could he present any claim? He submitted to the requisition that he should not seek to bind the girl; and reluctantly promised to refrain from writing to her. The father asked no more; for he trusted to time and absence to efface any dangerous impression.

He gave his young friend a cordial invitation to remain for the night; to stay until he could hear from his lawyers in London. But Reginald could not stay—even to sup and pass the evening.

His meeting with Alicia in the drawing-room in the presence of others was painful and embarrassing, and he was glad to take leave early. More than once, however, the eyes of the young girl gave him assurance that she would remember, and be steadfast to the vows they had exchanged.

Would he ever return? was the question pressing on the mind of more than one when he had left the house.

The baron in his heart hoped he would not. Deeply as he commiserated his misfortunes, he was determined not to permit his only child to sacrifice

herself to any romantic ideas of love. He would take care of that. She should go to London; she should see the world; she should have distinguished suitors. Perhaps she might listen to the suit of her cousin Herrick, when society had polished his manners, and he had become a man of the world. He would not object to that. The barony ought to be continued in the family; he had no son, and Herrick would represent his dignities. He would be satisfied to see his daughter the Baroness of Swinton.

In the young girl's heart "hope told a flattering tale;" and, confident of her lover's ability to triumph over evil fortune, she anticipated his early return. Her father loved her too much, she thought, to oppose her in that on which her happiness depended, and she resolved patiently to "bide her time."

Reginald was not so hopeful, for he saw the difficulties awaiting him; but he could not despair, when the sunshine of that bright smile was in his heart.

In the afternoon of the next day Alicia was preparing for her walk, as usual. She had not asked Margaret to accompany her, but that young lady, coming from her home in the village, met her as she left the gate.

Margaret linked her arm with Alicia's and begged her not to walk toward the ravine or the Roman well.

"That is just where I was going, lassie," said the love-lorn maiden. "You know why that spot is so dear to me."

She made a confidante of her foster-sister, disclosing to her all that had passed between herself and Reginald, under an injunction of secrecy.

"But scarce an hour since," said Margaret, "I met Master Herrick in the dell. He was in a rage of passion. Some lad in the village had told him he saw you yesterday beside the well with a gentleman, and described his English dress. The lad saw him kiss your hand many times, and reported the same to Master Herrick."

Alicia stood still, crimson with indignation.

"And my cousin listened to the boor?" she exclaimed, amazed.

"He did; he was wrought to fierce passion. He has gone to wait for you. He set upon me when I met him, railing at me for what he called my encouragement of your folly; for he will have it that the favored gallant was Sir Victor Wilder."

"Now I am not my father's daughter," cried the indignant girl, "if I do not put an end, at once and forever, to this impertinence!"

"Best let it pass, dear. The young man's passion will abate."

"And suffer him to hold me in a leash like a dog, to be obedient only to his bidding? No; I will not endure such unseemly behavior!"

"Stay, dear Alicia—"

"Stay me not! What will the neighbors think? That I have a master! That he should dare question a village lad concerning my movements!"

"He may do you harm, if you encounter him while his rage is seething!" pleaded Margaret.

"I shall know how to manage him." And Alicia broke from her friend's hold.

"Let me go with you!"

"No; I will see him alone. Do not be afraid, Margaret, and say nothing. In the dell, said you? I will go there directly."

"I will follow you, darling. He shall not see me; but I will guard you from his savage violence, if he dares speak roughly."

Alicia walked rapidly away, and Margaret followed, closely enough to keep her in sight.

The shade of the tall forest trees fell sweetly over the green sward by the well. The song of birds was the only sound heard, save the rippling of a tiny stream trickling down the rocks.

But there strode the irritated young man, chafing with his undisciplined temper, and furious jealousy.

He stopped when he saw the fair girl coming toward him. She, too, stopped, and rested her hand on the tall hewn stone at the well's mouth.

After a moment of silence, the young man burst into mocking laughter.

"Ye did not bargain for *my* company here, at this hour of tryst!" he said, bitterly. "I know well whom you are looking for!"

"I came to meet yourself, Master Herrick Maur," answered Alicia, defiantly.

"Ye speak falsely!" he cried, with the Scottish accent into which his speech glided under excitement. "Ye would ha' none o' me here, but another; and it is me ye ha' to reckon with!"

"It is like the churl you are," cried the angry girl, "to give me the lie; but I shall call you to account for worse insults."

She threw her shawl over a mossy boulder, and took her seat with the air of a young queen about to pass judgement.

Herrick came a few paces nearer. His face was aflame with passion, and his eyes glared savagely. The girl gave him no time to speak.

"How dared you, sir, hold talk with a village boor about me, and listen to his spying? Is it thus you hold the name of your kinswoman, and a maiden of high birth?"

"And how dared this fair kinswoman of mine, and this high-born maiden, meet in secret the cowardly fop of an English baronet, and suffer his unseemly advances, after the assurances given to me?" was the savage retort.

"I will meet whom I please!"

"Nay, that ye shall not!"

"To none but my father do I owe obedience. Not to you, sir! It is nothing to you whom I choose to see, here or elsewhere!"

"Is't not?" gasped the young man, in a voice choked by rage, and striding up to her, he clutched her arm. "Ye forget your bonds to me, mistress!"

"I reject and cast them off, utterly!" cried Alicia, starting to her feet, and flinging off his grasp. "You have gone too far, sir! I am nothing to you—and never will be—never!"

"You swore to me you would not wed another man! Yet you are toying and dallying with my rival when I am absent, and meeting him in secret!"

"Listen to me," said the girl, with the dignity of authority, again seating herself, and waving her hand for him to step back. "The oath you extorted from me when I was in deadly peril and scarce knew what I said, has no binding force, and I shall never acknowledge any; nor shall it be kept. And you know I would never wed *you*; so that you need not claim the right of an affianced husband to watch me and storm at me. I am a free maiden and you have no right over me."

Herrick began to feel that he had indeed gone too far. He struck his breast with his clenched hand.

"You will not keep that solemn oath?" he exclaimed.

"You had no right to prescribe it. It was a dastardly and cruel thing to take advantage of a poor girl's desperate strait. No; that promise had no force; and I am not bound to keep it."

"You are pledged to marry another man, then?" muttered Herrick, his eyes gleaming like coals of fire. "Beware, madam, I will kill the Englishman, before he shall have you!"

"Your insane fury has led you into an error. It was not Sir Victor with whom I spoke here yesterday—"

"It was!" rudely interrupted young Maur.

"I have said it was *not*, and I shall not repeat my denial. You have no right to find fault with me in any case. Now, let me hear no more of this; and, moreover, I bid you cease your persecution of me. If you do not, I shall entreat my father to take me away from home."

"To London, mayhap?"

"Very likely. He has often promised that."

Alicia rose and moved to leave the dell. But the miserable victim of his own passion prevented her.

"Stay, Alicia! hear me! but one word! I have offended you; but you see how wretched I am. It is because I love you so madly!"

"Let me pass if you please!"

"Cruel girl! Can you not at least pardon me?"

She turned back, softened.

"I pardon you freely, Herrick. We may be friends, if you will but cease to persecute me."

"And it will be with us as before? You are mine?"

"No; I am not, and never will be!"

"At least, you are pledged to favor no rival?"

"I will not grant even that; I am free."

Herrick looked as if he would have broken out into a tempest of execrations; but the girl's firmness forced him to some measure of self-control. Yet he strove to detain her by seizing her hand.

A scarf fluttered among the trees at a little distance. Alicia called "Margaret!" and her friend came hurriedly toward them. The two girls walked quickly out of the dell, leaving Herrick to himself.

CHAPTER XIX.

THE AVERTED CRIME.

It was late at night, and the household at Stone-Crag had retired to rest. It was the custom in summer to leave a side door unfastened for the convenience of any inmate who might return to the house after the usual hour of going to bed.

At the dead hour when all was at the stillest, a tall, manly figure approached this door, opened it and entered, leaving it wide open. He stood for an instant in the hall, then ascended the stairs, and turned into Herrick's apartment.

A light was burning in the outer room on one of the tables. By this the young man's face could be seen; pale, distorted, altered almost beyond recognition. He staggered in his walk; his eyes were bloodshot; his motions seemed not under the control of his will. Now he stood still, gazing on vacancy with the set glare of a sleep-walker; now he struck at the air with his clenched hand; now muttered rapidly to himself. Indulgence in the frantic passion of jealousy had brought the young man to the verge of madness.

He had lost all hope of Alicia's favor. Her resolute repudiation of the pledge given him at the castle convinced him that she would allow him to retain no hold upon her whatever. What then was he to do? Resign her to his smooth, dainty rival? Never! She might fling off her allegiance, due to him; but she should never be the baronet's bride!

He strode to the folding windows, and tore away the silken hangings. The moon had arisen, and poured a flood of silver light on the steep declivity of broken granite outside, and the upper stones covered with moss and luxuriant creepers. Far below lay the lawn sprinkled with shade trees and bordered by dark evergreens.

Herrick grasped his cumbrous carbine, which stood in the corner of the room. With the strength of iron nerves he poised it by the barrel in his hand.

"One blow, and the reed is crushed," he muttered; and the gleam of his white teeth through the bushy dark beard gave him a ferocious expression, as of a tiger stealing from his lair to crush an enemy.

Carrying the carbine, he passed out of the door, and crossed the corridor.

The door of Sir Victor's apartment on the opposite side was slightly ajar. Herrick pushed it open and entered.

The outer room was vacant, but the door beyond was open, leading into the sleeping chamber. To this the half-crazed young man, intent on murderous thoughts, advanced without an instant's hesitation.

The moon's rays flooded the chamber, and showed Sir Victor lying on the bed in a profound slumber.

His shapely form was well defined with no cover-

ing the sheet. His head rested on the pillows, on which his tawny locks lay like clusters of gold thread. The white temples, the delicate features, were fully defined in the pale light. His breathing was soft and regular as an infant's.

No thought of mercy had the assassin. He noted the fair and smooth cheek and brow, but with an inward execration. While he stood at some distance from the bed, the sleeper stirred restlessly, and flung out one arm, muttering the words: "Pon my life, Alicia—"

That name ran like lightning through the brain of the desperate man. Swiftly he raised the carbine in both his strong hands, and leveled it at the slumbering man. His finger was on the trigger; the fate of Sir Victor Wilder hung upon a hair.

Suddenly a consciousness of the dastardly meanness of the deed he contemplated flashed on Herrick, and he swung down the ponderous weapon.

"I will not kill him sleeping!" he cried.

He raised his voice to a shout. "Awake! Awake!"

Sir Victor awoke at once, and started up. Effeminate as he was, he was brave enough; and was not lacking in presence of mind. At a single glance he comprehended everything, and saw his own danger.

To rush upon his enemy and disarm him, or to shout for help, would be to set in full force his instincts of violence; to provoke a hand-to-hand encounter, in which he must fall. His strength was as nothing in comparison with Herrick's, and the latter was armed. But the power of reason over madness remained to him.

Perfectly calm, as he stood facing the intruder, he demanded:

"Who are you? What would you have?"

"I am come to kill you!" answered the assailant, as he again lifted the carbine.

Sir Victor's eyes were fixed upon the young man's, and did not quail for an instant.

"At least," said the baronet, "you will tell me what I have done to provoke you to murder me? How have I wronged you?"

"You know well how!"

"I assure you I do not know. I shall esteem it a favor if you will inform me. You are laboring under some terrible mistake!"

"No mistake! have you not stolen from me my betrothed bride?"

"Most surely not! Is it your cousin to whom you refer?"

"You know it is. You have come between me and her, and you shall die this night."

"You will thank me, I am sure, for saving you from the guilt of murdering an innocent man. So far from even a thought of interfering with your intentions, it is but a day or two since I consulted with her father, how to do you a service by procuring you a commission in the army. My letter to my father entreating him to use influence in your favor has already reached its destination."

"Did you not meet Alicia secretly at the well in the ravine yesterday?" demanded the young man, with set teeth and flashing eyes.

"I have not spoken with the young lady in three days out of the house."

"It's a lie!" shouted Herrick; "there were love passages between you yesterday in the dell."

"I never met her there," said the baronet, firmly, his clear, truthful eyes still fixed on those of his formidable foe. "It must have been the young English stranger, who was here in the evening!"

"Who was he?" demanded Herrick.

"They called him Reginald; I did not hear the other name. Nay—I remember now; the baronet said, afterward, he was the son of Lord Estonbury."

Down fell the carbine from the relaxing hand of the intruder.

"He here?" he gasped.

"He was here with the baronet yesterday."

The truth in a moment flashed on Herrick's mind. It was not Sir Victor Wilder whose rivalry he had to fear.

He struck his clenched hand against his forehead.

"Can you pardon me?" he cried. "It is I who have wronged you! I am a wretch not fit to live!"

Sir Victor snatched a silk dressing-gown from a chair by the bed, and hastily put it on.

"You are ill, Master Herrick," he said, kindly. "Allow me to assist you."

The young man had staggered back, and swayed to and fro, as if some mortal malady had stricken him. As the baronet approached, extending his arms to keep him from falling, he recoiled, turned and dashed through the outer room, across the corridor, and into his own apartment.

At the same instant sounded a loud voice at the front door. Some one was beating it violently with a staff, and shouting for admission in a stentorian voice.

The roused servants ran in confusion through the passages. The cries were redoubled, till the porter hastily shuffling along in a half-dressed state, unbolted and flung open the door.

By the light in his hand he saw a wild-looking man, bare-headed, with a stick in his hand, and with glaring eyes like one in a paroxysm of insanity.

The porter tried to close the door upon the intruder; but he pushed past the lackey, and made for the stairway. The man threw himself in his way, now convinced that the intruder was either beside himself or intent on some mischief. He called loudly for assistance to turn him out.

The baronet himself, in his dressing-gown, appeared at the head of the stairs; and not far behind him was Sir Victor, and his valet, newly roused from sleep.

Swinton knew the untimely visitor at a glance.

"It is Matlin, the seer!" he exclaimed. "Let him pass! Let him come hither! He is 'in the vision!'"

The others fell back. A degree of superstitious

reverence, in the minds of the common people, invested those gifted with the second-sight with super-human dignity.

Matlin passed up the stairs. His fixed, wide-open eyes took no note of any one, and they all gave way. He made straight for the apartment of Sir Victor Wilder, and the host followed him in, with the young baronet.

"I saw him here!" moaned the seer, as he stopped by the bed so lately occupied. "I saw him with uplifted carbine. It was leveled at the sleeping man in yonder bed. Have I come too late to save him?"

He turned to the baron in an agony of apprehension.

"Of whom do you speak?" demanded the baron.

"Oh, say, is it too late? Hath he done the deed? If he hath done it—I am accursed!" And the seer struck his forehead thrice with his open palm.

"What is he talking of?" asked Swinton.

The baronet answered:

"He is a seer, you say? He must then have foreseen, or known by some occult means, a scene that took place in this chamber, not many minutes ago."

"What mean you, for mercy's sake?"

"I was startled from sleep by a voice calling, 'Awake!' and I saw your kinsman, Master Herrick Maur, standing just there, with a carbine leveled at my head."

"Impossible!"

"Too late! too late!" groaned the seer, wringing his hands wildly.

"No! all is well!" cried Sir Victor, shaking Matlin's shoulder to arouse him from the trance. "It is not too late!"

"Where is he? Where is the unhappy boy?" questioned the seer, turning his gaze piteously round him, and repeatedly clasping his forehead with both hands. The baron, almost as confused, was eagerly questioning his guest.

"Herrick in your chamber, with intent to kill you? You must have been dreaming!"

"He came to murder me; he confessed it. His jealousy had wrought him to madness."

Rapidly he gave an account of what had happened.

"Darkness! Darkness!" wailed Mat, in his anguish and bewilderment. "I see him not for the darkness!"

The baron ordered the servants to retire.

He took Sir Victor's arm to go in search of Herrick.

As they crossed the corridor, the seer, who followed them, uttered a low cry:

"Ha! the rocks! He lies bruised and bleeding on the rocks!"

They had all now entered Herrick's room. The lamp was still burning; but the dressing-room and chamber were both empty.

Matlin had rushed at once to the window.

It was wide open. The moonlight, blending with the faint gleam of dawn—so early at that season—fell upon the broken rocks on which the casement looked. There was a narrow strip of pathway, fringed with shrubbery, above them just under the window. Below, a jumbled mass of bowlders, gray and moss-covered, made a rough and perilous descent of thirty feet.

"How dreadful!" cried the English baronet, as they looked out, shudderingly. "Can he have thrown himself down?"

The baron stepped out, peered over the verge, and called out loudly; but there was no answer.

The vision had passed from Matlin and he stood white and trembling. In another moment he had sunk upon the floor, overcome with weakness.

"Speak, Matlin!" cried Swinton. "You said he was lying upon the rocks. Tell us where we may find him."

But Matlin was insensible.

Then the baron's voice rung out, calling the servants of his household. As they came he bade them take torches and make search instantly. His young kinsman—he explained hurriedly to them—had made a misstep, and fallen upon the bowlders below. If not killed by the fall, he may have crawled away somewhere to obtain help.

CHAPTER XX.

A RASH DEED.

THE baron and Sir Victor were foremost, as the party descended to the search.

Alicia had been awakened by the unwonted noise and confusion, and hurriedly dressing, came out to ask what was the matter. Margaret, by chance, had stayed all night; she, too, was aroused and had gathered the facts from the alarmed servants.

The alarm, they said, had been given by Matlin the seer, coming "in the vision" to seek and save young Master Herrick, whom he had seen in deadly peril of some sort. On going to Herrick's room, they found he had strangely disappeared; and it was supposed he had somehow lost his footing, and fallen down the rocks beneath his bedroom windows.

Alicia threw herself weeping into Margaret's arms.

"It was no accident," she sobbed. "He has leaped down to kill himself, and I am the cause!"

"Be calm, dear friend," said Margaret, soothingly. "You have naught wherewith to reproach yourself. Stay you here, and I will go out after the gentlemen."

"No, Margaret; I will go with you."

The two girls went forth together.

By this time the first flush of morning appeared in the east. The party were searching with torches, but had as yet discovered no one. The young man was not upon the rocks beneath his window.

Margaret was first to hear the whine of a dog, a short distance below, and to the left.

"It is Mat's dog!" she exclaimed.

"Then he has found him!"

The girl whistled to the dog. He bounded a few steps toward them; but hearing the unfamiliar voice, went back.

But his master now called; and with a joyous bark, he obeyed the summons. A cry from the gentlemen in search told that they were now on the trace.

"Let us go to them!" said Alicia.

They hurried forward, and soon saw what had happened.

A human form lay in the hollow between two large bowlders; one arm bent under him, and perfectly motionless. After precipitating himself from the balcony into which the window opened, the young man had evidently crawled some distance before he swooned.

As they lifted him up, Alicia grew pale, leaned heavily on her friend's arm, and seemed about to faint. Margaret threw both arms around her, and drew her away toward the house. She saw it was no scene for either of them.

"Let us go in," she said, "and make ready the chamber. They will bring him presently."

The baronet and Matlin raised Herrick. He was quite insensible; but after being carried a few paces, gave signs of life by faint moans.

"Let him rest here," said the baron. "Take great care in moving him. Bide here a bit; I will go on, and dispatch Donald for the surgeon."

He walked rapidly toward the house.

Matlin was chafing the young man's forehead and hands, tears falling from his own eyes. Herrick opened his, and looked intelligently in his face.

"Oh, my boy!" cried the seer, clasping his hands in both his own, "why hast thou committed this sin?"

But the young man had swooned again. They lifted him and conveyed him into the house.

A bed had been hastily prepared in the morning-room; some called it Alicia's boudoir, for it was sacred to feminine occupation. Here stood her spinet, her embroidery frame, and her writing-desk and drawing-table. Vases of flowers bloomed in the corners. The fresh, fragrant air of early morning came in at the open windows, like a spirit diffusing blessings brought from heaven.

It was here Herrick was laid and tenderly cared for by the ladies; Margaret assuming the direction of matters. It was here the surgeon found him, already in the grasp of the fever consequent upon his late unnatural excitement, and the terrible shock to his system occasioned by his fall.

The medical man shook his head when he had examined his patient. Then he whispered directions to Margaret, whom his practiced eye at once singled out as the presiding genius of the invalid's quarters.

The other inmates of the room were ordered out. No one was to enter at all except Margaret and Matlin. He would watch the following night, and as long as the course of the fever continued.

Was the young man to be removed to his own chamber?

No; it was better he should remain where he was. There was risk in removal; for he had sustained internal injuries, that caused inflammation.

The baron followed the surgeon out.

"Will the poor laddie live?" he asked, apprehensively.

"I think he will; but it will be a tough tussle between life and death. Only be sure to have him kept quiet. His brain is in a state I do not like; his nerves have had some shock previous to his fall. Do you know what drove him to this act?"

"To what act?"

"Is it possible, Lord Swinton, you do not know he did this violence to himself?"

"What do you mean?"

"His fall was no accident. He must have leaped from the window or the balcony."

"Nay; he has had sorrow, but not to make him a lunatic! He may have been walking in his sleep."

"I tell you, no; he made that leap to end his life; for that very purpose."

"Why should he do that?"

"Ay, I ask you, why! Had aught befallen to drive him into lunacy?"

"Surely not."

"Something hath chanced, then, more than you know of. I will come this evening. Let no one but the young woman I spoke with stay in the room."

He rode away, and the baron turned back to lead away his daughter.

She was kneeling by the bed, her white brow pressed upon one of the sufferer's hands that was resting on the silken coverlet.

Margaret stood over her, calm but sorrowful, whispering her entreaties that she would rise. No one else was present.

Alicia made no resistance when her father lifted her up, and half-carried, half-led her from the room. He took her into his library, which was nearly opposite, the door opening into the hall. He placed her on a leathern couch and drew her fondly to his breast.

"You must not be cast down, child," he said, soothingly. "The surgeon thinks he will live."

The girl leaned her head on her father's shoulder, and sobbed piteously. He gave her again and again the assurance that they had everything to hope.

"I did not know you loved him, my sweet child!" he murmured. "Now that I know it, his life is precious as my own son's."

"Oh, father!" wailed the maiden, "it was my fault! If he should die, it is I who am his murderer!"

"Alicia!"

"Do not be angry with me! Pity me, dear father! I meant not to be harsh, but I drove him to frenzy!"

"I do not understand you, my daughter. Is it not true that you love Herrick; that you were betrothed?"

"Oh, no!"

"At least that you loved each other? Be calm, my child, and tell me all!"

Alicia lifted up her head. Her pale cheeks were wet with tears; but her eyes, frank and truthful, did not quail.

"My cousin loved me," she said. "I told you, papa, how he saved me at the castle, that night, and forced me to swear I would wed no other man."

"You promised him?"

"I was forced into it; that promise should never have been extorted. It was cruel to fetter me so!"

"Ha!" exclaimed the baron. Something of the truth began to break on his perceptions.

"Herrick was jealous of me; he gave me no peace. And yesterday we had a quarrel."

"A quarrel?"

"He reproached me so bitterly! He claimed me as belonging to him. He threatened to kill any suitor—"

"And you?"

"I was very angry. I spoke cruelly to him. I declared that I would never listen to his love, nor hold myself bound by any promise! That drove him mad!"

"But now, my daughter, you repent of having been cruel to him?"

"Oh, father, how could I foresee what has happened? He must have thrown himself from the balcony, in despair! If he should die—I shall die, too, of remorse!"

"We will not talk of dying, my child. Herrick will live! He is young, and his youthful strength will triumph over the fever. And when we have him well and strong again, you will make him happy, Alicia."

"What mean you, papa?"

"You know, now, that you love our kinsman. We will nurse him back to health, and then I will tell him my daughter returns his affection."

"Oh, no, no, no, father!"

"What else am I to understand? You said you would die too, if he should die."

"With remorse, I said, father! Because I was harsh to him. I do not love him, but as a kinsman, and as your friend!"

"Art sure, girl?"

"Sure, indeed, father. I could not marry him! Oh, never! never!"

The baron arose and paced the room, while Alicia wiped away the tears that would continue to flow.

At last her father stopped, regarding her steadfastly.

"Let us settle this matter," he said. "I have thought it might come to a match between the man who should wear my name and title, and my child. It would please me well, girl, to see you Herrick's bride."

"It cannot be, father! Never! Never!"

"Alicia, let me tell you, I can never give you to the young man Reginald, after what has happened. He was imprudent to come hither, landless and penniless, to weave snares for a maiden of honorable birth."

"Oh, father, he never tried to ensnare me!"

"You listened to him; I can see it all. He is a courtly gallant, and poor Herrick has no chance beside him. But we will send our young cousin to the army, and he will become courtly and polished too. He is the better man of the twain; and that you will acknowledge."

"Dear father—"

"We will speak no more of this now. Go to your room, my child."

Long after the girl went, her father mused on the unpromising aspect of affairs. Herrick's illness might be long; and when recovered, he must join the army, in which Sir Victor had promised him a commission. It might be a year or more before he and Alicia would again meet; and meanwhile she must not be allowed to cherish recollections of the young Englishman who had so indiscreetly betrayed his love on his last hurried visit.

The baron decided on taking his daughter to London. There she would mingle in the society to which her birth entitled her. She would forget her foolish romance for Reginald, and either make a brilliant marriage or turn with loving remembrance to her cousin when he should be fitted by his social experiences to woo and win a bride.

Matlin, the seer, devoted himself to his night-watches by the bedside of his young friend. But after two or three days it was necessary to find a substitute, and he returned to his hut for a day. There he was found and arrested by a party of soldiers, under the authority of a constable, on the charge of being one of the outlaws and abettors of the smugglers on the coast. The same party came to execute another warrant for the arrest of Herrick Maur. But the baron received them, and his testimony was sufficient to satisfy the magistrates that Herrick had not been one of the rioters. Evidence was also furnished of Matlin's innocence, and he was liberated.

Herrick was at the crisis of his fever when his faithful friend came to renew his attentive nursing. Youth and the strength of a rugged constitution carried him safely through.

One morning he unclosed his eyes and looked with intelligence into the fair, mild face of Margaret Heyburn bending over him.

"Where am I?" he feebly asked.

A soft hand was laid on the patient's forehead, and a soft voice bade him ask no questions, but sleep.

When the patient was able to listen, Margaret told him of the illness he had suffered, and of the dangers he had passed. Also, that the baron and his daughter, as soon as they were assured that his life was safe, had set out for London with the young English baronet, leaving him to the care of the physician and his faithful Matlin.

CHAPTER XXI.

THE UNWILLING BRIDE.

It was a holiday in the little hamlet near Estonbury Court. The joy-bells rung at intervals; the village maidens were arraying themselves in their best finery, and the children, dressed in white and carrying garlands of fresh flowers, were forming in procession to march to the church when the appointed hour was near.

They were to strew with flowers the pathway of a youthful bride. The little church was decorated with flowers, in honor of the festal occasion.

It was the wedding-day of Lady Helen Vane Thorpe, the now acknowledged daughter of the late marquis and the widowed Lady Estonbury. She was to marry Maurice Howard, the Marquis of Estonbury, who had succeeded to the title and estates upon the discovery of Reginald's birth being made public.

Reginald had relinquished the honors he had won so nobly as soon as he was fully satisfied of the truth of the statements of the woman he had believed to be his mother. After a dispassionate examination by his solicitors and the high counsel they had summoned to aid their researches, no doubt remained that the exchange of infants had really taken place at the time specified.

Corroborative proof was furnished by details apparently trifling, and the evidence of one or two persons which supplied missing links, till no further questions could be raised.

Once admitted the exchange and the imposition on the late marquis of a supposititious heir, there was no need of further inquiry. No attempt was made to follow the noble pair—Lord and Lady Estonbury—in their travels and prolonged sojourn on the continent, subsequently to the birth of Lady Estonbury's child.

The matter was not suffered to go before the courts. Reginald only waited to be sure he had no claim to the title, to abandon it quietly. He himself wrote to the heir-at-law.

While Reginald prepared himself for the study of the profession on which he expected to rely for a living, the new marquis traveled in state, surrounded by his dependents, to the splendid home he was to possess.

He asked to see the widowed marchioness, and was shown to the drawing-room, where she received him in all the magnificence of her beauty and rank. Her toilet was as rich as could be consistent with a widow's first mourning. She presented the marquis formally to her daughter, the Lady Helen Vane Thorpe, and welcomed him to Estonbury Court.

Lady Estonbury had heard it said of the heir-at-law that he was a man who was extremely tenacious of what belonged to himself. He knew his own rights, and would never bate a jot of them. He was not young, and had had a struggle with the hard world for means to live in comfort before the astounding news came to lift him to the summit of earthly prosperity. Now he was ready "to take the goods the gods provide," and to enjoy it to the utmost.

Some dowagers might have been apprehensive of what should happen to themselves at the advent of an heir unknown to them. There were several points to be settled, in which the separate interests might conflict, and the man in power might be supposed to be sure of victory. Lady Estonbury had no fears whatever. She was not even disturbed by the least suspicion that her favorite scheme—the marriage of her child with the heir—might be baffled.

At the first glance she read the character of the man with whom she had to deal. The narrow and receding forehead, the full but not firm lips, the eyes that often were fixed on the ground while speaking, and seldom met the looks fastened on the face, were expressive features. The new lord was a finely-proportioned man, of goodly breadth and length of limb, and both graceful and self-possessed; but his countenance gave the impression of a character weak, reticent, and governed by self-interest in preference to any loftier principle. A want of generous sympathy, a sordid regard for selfish considerations, and a degree of obstinacy in the pursuit of cherished aims, were decidedly apparent, in spite of the veneering of polished society manners.

Helen was painfully affected by the first sight of this man. A shiver ran through her whole frame. She knew her mother's purpose; she knew also her unscrupulous determination to carry it out. It was as vain for her to attempt resistance, as for the captive bird to beat its wings against the iron bars of its cage.

The hand she gave the stranger was like ice, and her eyes drooped before him. He looked in her face for a moment, and one might have read in his that he thought her plain and unattractive.

Lady Estonbury still assumed the role of mistress of the establishment, and treated the marquis as a welcome guest. He was invited to remain, like any other stranger, and shown to his apartment, whither his servants had already conveyed his baggage and the various belongings brought with him.

As he threw himself into a large easy-chair and submitted to the operations of his valet in preparing his toilet for dinner, his thoughts ran on the cool self-possession of the lady he had just quitted, and the evident intention she had of bringing about the alliance with her daughter.

"Hum—I can see it very well," he mused, with a

gentle sub-titter. "Would like to hook me—um—um. I don't wonder young Reginald would have nothing to do with her!—um—always thought it was that disappointment brought her ladyship's conscience to the surface! Um—a piece of good luck for me! Wants to hook me now—um—but it's no go, my lady! no, no, no! The Marquis of Estonbury! ha! I shall marry—in time—um—but I shall have a bride that will do credit to my taste—um. Radiant beauty—bright black eyes—gait like a Juno—the hand of an empress—um—the majesty of a Cleopatra—the spirit of a Joan— Ah!"

And he smacked his lips—for he knew a realization of all this schedule of female charms—one, too, whom he had failed to make sensible of his own claims to homage or admiration.

We will not dwell upon his new dreams, bright and golden as they were. Days passed, and he took no further steps toward assuming the mastership of his domain. Somehow or other, her ladyship was still the controlling power. But he meant to have a settlement shortly. Finally, after conference with his steward and his valet, he resolved on spending a few weeks in London at the season's close, and visiting the Continent before disturbing Lady Estonbury in her occupancy of the Court.

He gave orders for the necessary packing, summoned his confidential man of business and placed him in charge, and graciously announced to the lady he honored as his guest, though she still treated him as hers, his intention to be absent, perhaps many months, and his wish that she would regard Estonbury Court as her own residence as long as it should please her to do so.

That evening the lady summoned the marquis to an interview in her private parlor, in her suit of apartments, sacred to herself.

The conference lasted several hours. When Lord Estonbury went to his own chamber his valet noticed that he looked haggard and worn, as if ten years had passed in one hour over his head, leaving the traces of time and decay. His sallow complexion wore a sickly pallor; his lips trembled; his eyes glanced furtively about him; his whole aspect was strangely different from the assured, bold and easy manner that had marked his demeanor.

He dismissed the attendant with a curt reproof for waiting for him; he had no business to take note how late his master chose to remain up, nor how he looked. The man heard his lord bolt his dressing-room door, and went away muttering, as he yawned sleepily:

"What's in the wind, now? Never did such a thing before, as lock me out! Him and the dowager's had a quarrel, I'm thinking!"

Lady Estonbury had forbidden her maid to come to her room. As she undressed herself, it could be seen that she was unusually pale, and bore the traces of great agitation. But her proud spirit and iron will, as ever, triumphed over the least tendency to weakness.

She went to the door of her daughter's sleeping-room, listened, and tried to turn the knob. It would not yield; the door was fastened. Not a sound was to be heard within. The lady sighed; and if her haughty soul ever bowed itself in prayer it was nearest that frame when she mentally invoked blessings on the head of the only being she loved on earth or in heaven!

"Blessings? Those of worldly rank, station and wealth. The state of a peeress; the wealth of a princess. Did happiness go with it? Nay—she thought not of that. Could those gifts satisfy the loving heart of the girl? She troubled not herself to answer the question."

The next morning the girl was sent for to attend her mother in her dressing-room. Lady Estonbury was calm and reserved. She touched Helen's forehead with her lips, and bade her be seated.

"Lord Estonbury," she said, quietly, after a pause, "proposed for you, Helen, last evening."

The girl started, and looked in the lady's face with wild, affrighted eyes.

"Did you not hear me, child? The marquis wishes to make you his wife!"

Helen rose and stood before her mother.

"It cannot be that he wishes it!" she cried. "He has shown me no attention; he does not care for me!"

"How can you judge of that? What does a girl know of a man's heart? He has proposed for you; it is the best proof of his love."

"Love!" echoed Helen, faintly, yet with a tone of mockery.

"And if he were not romantic enough to fall in love at first sight, has a man of rank no other thought, or purpose, or duty, than how to indulge his fancy? A peer must choose a wife who can grace his station."

"I am not such a one!" murmured the girl.

"I have told you, Helen, what his lordship said; I shall expect you to be obedient to my will, and prepare to receive him as your affianced husband."

"Oh, Lady Estonbury—" she began.

The lady frowned.

"Is it thus you address me?"

"Mamma, then! Spare me, I entreat you! Do not force me to marry this man!"

"Helen!"

"He does not love me! He does not want to marry me! You have made him do this!"

"Foolish girl! How could I compel the man to offer himself to you?"

"I know not; but you have power to do anything! Oh, mother! leave me free."

"Ungrateful girl!"

"I am not ungrateful for all your kindness; but I cannot, oh, I cannot wed a man who is averse to me, and whom I—almost hate!"

"Wretched child! you love that base-born churl, Reginald Chisholm!"

The girl sunk at her mother's feet, hiding her face in the folds of her dress, and struggling to repress her sobs.

"Do you dare confess it?" the lady cried. "That a daughter of mine should stoop to such degradation!"

Then Helen lifted up her tear-stained face; though she did not rise.

"It was yourself who taught me to love Reginald," she said, in trembling yet passionate tones. "You knew him to be just what he is; yet you wished him to be my—husband."

"And he scornfully rejected you! He threw up title and fortune, rather than wed you! You, who have the blood of the Estonburys in your veins—while he— Out on you, girl! Have you no touch of proper pride?"

The girl covered her face with both her hands.

"Ay, you may well hide your face! To love a man who has spurned you! Will you grovel, still, at his feet? Show that you have the spirit of your race! Become the Marchioness of Estonbury! Let him see you are not crushed by his contempt!"

Alas! there was no pride in the maiden's nature to answer such an appeal. She loved, and loved hopelessly. She would have laid down life for the object of her love; she had no spirit to rise in resentment against him for having despised her!

The conference was prolonged more than an hour. Lady Estonbury was accustomed to rule with absolute sway. Her will was despotic; her daughter's had never before been arrayed in opposition. The stronger nature came off victorious.

Helen left the drawing-room drooping like a stricken lily, and subdued to full submission.

She begged permission to spend the day in her own room. This was granted till evening.

After dinner the young lady appeared in the drawing-room to receive her accepted suitor. They could not be trusted alone; and the marchioness spent the evening in their company, and bade her daughter play and sing. Before bedtime it was arranged that the marquis should take a short trip to London, while the trousseau of his bride was preparing; returning at an early day for the wedding.

CHAPTER XXII.

THE SOLEMN VOW.

The bride sat in her dressing-room before the mirror. The splendid room was filled with the paraphernalia of wedding finery. The snowy silk, with its rich velvety folds, lay upon a divan; the exquisite veil of Mechlin lace and orange-flower wreath were at hand. The table was covered with essences, pearl powder, and all the various appendages of the toilet.

Helen would let no hairdresser approach her silken brown tresses. Only her own maid was permitted to brush them, as usual; and she was ordered to plait and coil them in the style worn every day. Not an ornament was added to their glossy abundance.

When the maid had finished her duty, she was dismissed, as her young mistress desired to be alone.

The bride was deathly pale. Her eyes were sunken; but a strange, wild light occasionally leaped from them. Then she would close them with a pained shudder, as if shutting in thoughts she could not bear to reveal.

Once she glanced at her reflection in the full-length mirror. It was not that of a beauty, but a suffering woman. She turned away with a sigh, quickly repressed.

Then she held up her left hand. On the forefinger sparkled a solitaire diamond of enormous value. It was her engagement ring. She looked at it steadily, and smiled a wan smile; but not in admiration of its gorgeous brilliance.

"Badge of slavery!" she murmured, under her breath. "Key that may yet unlock his prison gates! I will bear one for the sake of the other!"

The door opened softly, and Mrs. Chisholm, the former lady's-maid of the marchioness—her favorite still, and called to her service on special occasions—came in.

"Bless my soul, Lady Helen!" she exclaimed; "not dressed yet! Where is your ladyship's tire-woman? She has quite neglected her duty! Shall I call her and the other maids?"

"Stop!" cried the girl, authoritatively.

"Or will you let me dress you? I have great skill, my lady thinks; for she would have no hands about her but mine, on this occasion. May I put on your dress? I see your hair is done; but I wish you would permit me to crimp it under the wreath!"

"Leave me," said Helen.

"But do you know how late it is? The bridemaids are ready, and waiting! My lord is dressed, and in his room; the valet told me; and my lady was finished half an hour since. She will be here for you directly."

"Did you not hear me, Chisholm? Leave this room!"

The woman stared. It was the first time the girl had ever spoken in that tone, in her hearing.

"I beg pardon," she whispered, with a courtesy so low as to savor of irony. As she went out, she muttered: "The young lady feels her rank! To speak so to me, who was her mother so long!"

A few minutes later, and Lady Estonbury herself, in her sweeping robes, dressed for the ceremony, passed into the room where her daughter still sat, absorbed in thought. She was vexed at the report of her maid, and spoke severely.

"Helen, what is this? Not dressed? Alone, too? Where are your maids?"

"It is time enough," the girl answered.

"There is no time for dallying. The carriages wait and the guests are ready. I will call in the tire-women."

"Stay a moment," said Helen, as her mother touched the bell-cord.

"Why? Have you anything to say? What is the matter, child?"

"Yes, I must say something. I have been only an obedient slave so far—"

"How strangely you talk! Surely you are not going to turn rebel now?"

"No fear of that. I have submitted to my fate. I will try to do my duty. I will be a gentle and obedient wife, even if I cannot love him."

"An excellent resolution. You will be happy, too; I doubt it not."

"I do not know—I do not care. But I want to tell you one thing, mother. I was in the alcove of the room where you and Mrs. Chisholm were talking last evening."

The lady started, and grew pale.

"You were in the alcove?" she asked. "You hid yourself there to listen to our conversation?"

"No, madam, I did not; it was an accident my being there. When I heard you I was coming out; but you uttered a name that arrested my attention, and I lingered. Yes, I confess it, I was determined to hear what you had to say, concerning him!" The lady closed her teeth and set her lips, repressing her emotion.

"A singular curiosity," she said, with sarcastic emphasis, "in a bride on the eve of marriage."

"I was anxious to know," continued the girl, "if you had fulfilled the stipulation you made. You know what it was?"

"Oh, yes! to offer your young hero an annuity! It was respectfully tendered, according to the agreement between us."

"And accepted by him?"

"You are a silly girl; ignorant of the ways of men, to ask such a question. Of course the young man declined it."

"He declined it?"

"There was no reason why he should receive the bounty of one to whom he has ever been a torment and a shame!" said the lady, bitterly. "With his ideas of independence, he could have but one answer to such a proposition."

"And he suffers all the evils of poverty?"

"He found friends who set him up in the study of a profession. He will do well enough. Helen, you make me blush for you. At such a time as this, to occupy your mind with the concerns of another than your husband; one, too, who slighted and scorned you! Shame upon you!"

"Have patience, mother; I have more to say. I discovered something from your conversation which I did not suspect."

"Indeed! And what, pray?"

"That you are still practicing some terrible wrong, or fraud, toward Reginald."

"Helen! How dare you?"

"I heard enough to convince me. There is something behind your confession that he was not your son. You have done something more to him."

"Wicked girl, what mean you?"

With clenched hand the lady strode up to the dressing-table. Helen rose and faced her, defiance flashing in her eyes.

"He is not the son of the Chisholms; and there is some mystery you are hiding, of vital consequence to him; a mystery even Chisholm does not know."

The lady's very lips were livid with passion or fear. They moved convulsively, but uttered no audible sound.

"I heard her plead with you, madam, to know 'the secret.' I heard her say: 'he was not her son; that the birth-mark was not on his arm.' The 'birth-mark' was her son's, as I understood."

Lady Estonbury clutched the girl's arm with a grasp like iron.

"You serpent!" she hissed in her ear. "You unnatural viper! You would sting me to death!"

"I would do you good. Not harm. I would ease your conscience of a crime that will crush you, slay you, if you do not repent. I adjure you, solemnly, mother, if you have wronged Reginald, make him restitution. If you do not, I swear that I will!"

The lady smote her forehead with her open palm.

"Am I going mad?" she exclaimed, "or is it my own child that has risen against me to drag me down to ruin?"

"Mother! mother!" cried Helen. "Listen to me! Whatever stands in the way of doing right, have courage to do it! I will stand by you!" And she flung her arms round the lady's neck.

But the lady tore her clasped hands apart and flung her off.

"Away, unnatural girl!" she cried. "Base child that would destroy your mother! Perjured bride, that would sin against your husband for the sake of a stranger!"

Helen answered not; but her bosom's heaving and her quivering features told of the excitement under which she labored.

"Can you deny—shameless girl! that you love the man yet?"

"I do not deny it," replied the sad bride. "It was the first confession made to Lord Estonbury, when you forced me to receive him as my betrothed. I thought he would have left me, when I told him; but he said he would not give me up."

"You are not worthy his love, ungrateful girl!"

"I know it well. I am not worthy the love of any man. Call him hither, madam. Tell him I am resolutely bent on one thing; to discover what is the conspiracy against Reginald and to foil it! Yes—mother! I swear to do it! I will find it out yet! I warn you now, that you may save yourself the loss and shame hereafter; that you may save me the agony of knowing that I have brought exposure on you!"

Lady Estonbury paced the room with irregular steps, struggling with the passion that threatened to overmaster her.

At last she stopped directly in front of her daughter,

glaring at her with wolfish eyes, her face blanched to the hue of marble.

"Are you done?" she growled.

"Yes. I have said all, now. Let me repeat it. I pledge myself—so help me Heaven—to discover and bring to light the wrong under which *he*—Reginald—suffers! to do *him* right, even if it costs my life; if it costs the ruin of all my house! This I have sworn, mother. Now, will you call my lord, and let him know my resolution?"

"There is no need!"

"Is he aware of the 'secret'?"

"Whatever there is—or has been—is known to him, as much as to me. What a fool I am, to let such an outbreak move me!"

The lady wiped her damp forehead with her costly lace-bordered handkerchief.

"Now, you are coming to your senses, I hope! Your melodrama is finished!"

Helen looked in her face unblenching.

"I cannot compass your secret," she said, mournfully. "I cannot foil the conspiracy, till I know more. But I *will* know more. Be sure of that."

There was a tap at the door and a mingling of sweet and shrill voices came to the ear.

"Is the bride ready?"

Lady Estonbury flung the door open, and called the maids. They came hurriedly in. The bride stood rigid and pale as a ghost, her eyes fixed on her mother.

"Do your work, and do it quickly," said her ladyship, authoritatively.

It was speedily done. Helen made no resistance. She was arrayed in the bridal dress, and the bridal veil was fastened in her hair. The flowers were duly placed, and the bouquet was placed in her hand.

She said not one word. Only once her imploring gaze sought her mother's. The mute appeal was understood, and scornfully dismissed.

The clock had struck eleven some time since. The procession had formed; the bridal train was waiting. Helen was led out by her mother from her chamber, and down the grand stairway.

The bridemaids, attendants and guests joined them in the hall. They took their places in the carriages.

On the green fronting the church, the wedding-party alighted, and formed for entrance, while the village girls strewed flowers in the way, and the merry bells rung, and the hum of holiday rejoicing was hushed as the long-expected train took its way into the ivy-covered church. There, the marquis received his bride at the altar.

Lady Estonbury watched her anxiously till the ceremony was over.

Then she uttered an inaudible "Thank Heaven," and turned to depart with the rest.

The signing of names in the register, the adjournment of the gay company to the great house, the wedding-breakfast, and the departure of the married pair on their wedding tour, followed in due order.

CHAPTER XXIII.

A NEW LOVE.

By the window of an upper room at "Stone Crag" mansion, the invalid, Herrick Maur, reclined; looking out on the picturesque landscape, and inhaling the cool breeze that crept in, laden with the fragrance of new-mown hay from the meadow.

His strength had returned very slowly. In many respects he was changed. The wild outbreaks of passion he had been wont to indulge in, were subdued; he bore with exemplary patience the drawbacks of weakness and depression of spirits.

Margaret Heyburn, his kind nurse, and the superintendent of the household, had pressed on his attention, from time to time, books out of the library, and had spent many evenings in reading aloud to him. The taste for reading once awakened, it became a passion with him; and thus many lonely hours were beguiled.

He always listened attentively when the girl brought in letters from the baron or Alicia, to read them aloud. The baron frequently wrote to him. He would read these missives again and again, as he lay on the couch; but never sent message or word in return; nor had he ever once alluded to Alicia.

He began to long, as he gained strength, for freedom to go out; to ride, or to walk. But he submitted to the physician's orders, contenting himself with Matlin's visits for news of the outer world. The internal injuries he had received were severe, and time was necessary to recover, or they might have led to some fatal disorder of the chest.

On this morning he felt unusually well. A few embers burned in the chimney, for the sharp, bracing air had begun to be felt in the early morning; but the window was open. Herrick had laid aside his book, and was watching the workmen and bummers at their several tasks below the terraces. As he gazed idly, he saw two horses passing along the line bordering the copse a quarter of a mile distant. He started up quickly, and touching the bell-cord, rung for his attendant.

The man appeared at the door in a moment.

"I see Matlin's steed yonder," his master said; "but he hath some companion. By the sweep of her garments, I trow, it is a woman. Call Margaret hither."

Margaret was already near the door; and she came in as the man left the room. To her the invalid repeated his question.

"Do not excite yourself," she said, soothingly, taking his hand, and noting that it trembled, while a flush mounted to his pale forehead. "Who could it be that would come hither under Matlin's guidance?"

"Nay—I dreamed not it was—my fair cousin!" the young man answered. "I am not so weak as

you think, Margaret. The fever left me many weeks since."

"And your—your kinsfolk are in London," added Margaret.

"Ay, and likely to stay there; at least not to return hither. Perhaps never—one, at least. Said you not the fair lady was a worshiped belle in the gay world?"

"I did not say so; but—"

"But she must be; and no marvel; her beauty is rarer than a crown. You see, I can speak of her calmly now, Margaret."

"Ay, and I am glad, Master Herrick."

"I have more to say, anon; but now, girl, go and receive this stranger. Bring both hither directly."

Margaret left the room, and presently returned, ushering in the seer in his usual Scottish clansman's dress, and a lady in traveling coat and a hat such as was worn in the lowlands. A veil of gray gauze fluttered from it, but was not thick enough to conceal the features of the wearer.

Herrick started to his feet, exclaiming:

"Hilda!"

The woman gave a short, gasping cry, sprung forward, flung her arms about the young man, clasped him to her breast, and then sunk on the floor at his feet.

"Hilda! What news bring you? My father! Is he dead?"

"The heavens forbid, Master Herrick!" cried the woman, rising as he drew her up, and taking the seat on the couch to which he waved her. "Sir Kenneth fares well! He is anxious but for his son—of whose illness the seer wrote to him."

Matlin explained that he had given the father such an account as was necessary, without alarming him.

"And I came over to see to the household stuff, and various matters to be sold, and the money conveyed to Sir Kenneth," added Hilda.

"My father is well?"

"Ay, and in excellent spirits, save for missing the face of his son. He hath but a lonely life."

"And Gregory?"

"Gregory, and the rest, joined a company on the return to England."

"Gregory in England?"

"They were on the coast of Wales a month since."

"To put their heads into the lion's mouth," said Matlin.

"Nay—they have quit the smuggling concern. They were on a French trading vessel."

"My father hath need of moneys, then?"

"Not yet; but he wants his goods disposed of, as he cannot return hither."

Herrick beckoned Margaret to him, and whispered to her. She nodded and left the room, presently returning with a small ebony box, which she placed in the invalid's hands.

"I have a store of gold here," said Herrick, "meaning to send it to my father. Take it, Hilda, and give it into his hands."

She took the box, and the key, suspended on a ribbon, which she hung about her neck.

"You must not part with all you have," put in Matlin. "I have summated to send, too."

"And I, too," said Margaret, her brown eyes filling with tears.

"Let her take what I send," replied Herrick. "I will bring more when I come."

"And will ye come, Master Herrick? Eh! but it will be joyful news I shall take with me to dear Sir Kenneth!"

"I will come as soon as I am strong again."

"And I will bear the lad company," added Matlin.

The woman clasped her hands with joy. Margaret alone looked grave.

Herrick again whispered her; she rung the bell, and gave an order to the attendant.

"You have taken no dinner," the invalid said, addressing the seer. "Go down and refresh yourselves; drink my health in a stoup of wine, and then come back to talk over what we are to do."

At the invitation of Margaret, the two visitors went to the dining-room, where an excellent lunch was served. She herself did not stay, but returned to Herrick as soon as she had ordered the horses to be cared for at the stables.

She found the convalescent pacing the room; but when he saw her, he resumed his seat on the sofa, bidding her close the door, and then sit beside him.

"You did not read me the last letter that came from London, lassie!"

"It was from—Alicia. I did not know if you would care to hear it."

"Full of woman's gossip, I ween!"

"Ay, and such is ever folly in men's eyes."

"Tell me, is my fair cousin to marry soon?"

"To marry? No; not to my knowledge."

"But she is affianced, I know!"

"I never said so."

"She weds the dandy baronet, after all!"

"Who said that of her?" demanded the girl.

"Is it not true?"

"It is false. She would be a maiden all her days ere she would look at Sir Victor Wilder as a husband."

"Indeed! But he loves her; and a woman learns to love a persevering suitor."

"She will never learn to love him!"

"Then she must have conned the lesson with another. I know the heart of a wench."

Margaret was silent.

"That is true, then? Alicia is a betrothed maiden?"

The girl was troubled. Was the heart of the young man returning to its madness? She knew not what to say, between her anxiety to save him, and her fidelity to her young foster-sister.

Herrick repeated the question.

"She is not betrothed. Her father would not have it."

"She loves—then?"

Again silence!

"Margaret, you are afraid of me. I was a fool once; but I am so no longer. I was cured in heart by the bruises that so sorely wounded my body. I am no whining, pining lover. Alicia is my cousin; she can never be more to me. I can bear to hear of her becoming the bride of any worthy man, save only that fop of a baronet."

"He is your friend. Did he not bestir himself to obtain a commission for you?"

"Useless to a man crippled of his strength. And the leech says it may be a year more before I can hunt, or ride a day's journey," wailed Herrick. "I shall carve out my own fortune, when I can wield a sword. Now, tell me, girl, who is Alicia to marry?"

"No man. The baronet will never consent."

"But she loves some one. Ha!" as a sudden recollection struck him, "who was the stranger I saw with her the day before I played the fool, and sought the life of the baronet coxcomb, and was idiot enough to throw myself from the balcony?"

"The stranger was—young Reginald Lord Cressy—at least he was called so, before it was made known that he was not the son of the noble Marquis of Estonbury," answered Margaret, with hesitation.

"Ha! the young man who gave up the title and estates as soon as he found he was not the heir?"

"The same!"

"By George! he is a noble fellow! Where is he now?"

"I do not know. He went to studying law, I heard from the laird's people—the Laird of Ralston."

"I would consent that my cousin should marry such a man."

"Her father will never consent."

"Not if I entreat him?"

"Alas, no!"

"And it is he whom Alicia loves?"

Margaret bowed her head. She would have arisen, to leave the room; but Herrick stayed her.

"I have summated to say, girl. You see I am cured of my folly."

The girl lifted her eyes and met those of Herrick fastened on her face. She blushed and looked down again without answer.

"Shall I prove it to you? Shall I show you that Alicia is no longer loved by me? I love another, Margaret!"

Her face grew suddenly pale; but she moved not, nor looked up.

"Wouldst know whom? Yourself, dear Margaret."

He took her hand; but she drew it away with a shiver.

"Nay—turn not from me, girl. You are worth a dozen like Alicia."

"Oh, Master Herrick, do not mock me!" the girl cried, with a convulsive sob.

"Mock you, Margaret? I am serious. I know your worth. While sickness held me a prisoner, I have been faithfully nursed and tended by one gentle, tender girl, to whom I have yielded my heart. Who shall gainsay me? I love you, lass, and I will make you my wife, and mistress of all here when it comes to me."

"Master Herrick!" the girl said, resolutely, and now returning his gaze with earnest, anxious look.

"You must not speak in this way!"

"Why?"

"I am but a dependent. My parents were servants of the baron. I am not fit to be the wife of his kinsman."

"Who is to say so? I will fight any man who dares even think it! I will have none but you, girl; and the baron may go hang! What is it to him?"

"The lords of Swinton have aye wedded ladies of blood and birth."

"And you shall queen it with the best of them, Margaret, if I ever live to be Baron of Swinton. Come, come; there is but one thing can turn me from my purpose; and that is, to hear you say you love me not."

"Nay, Master Herrick—"

He captured her hand again, and drew her to his side.

"Look at me, Margaret; in mine eyes—girl; so. Now, tell me if you do not love me!"

The swiftly-varying color, the bashful droop of the eyelids, made confession before the tongue could utter sound.

"Answer me, Margaret."

"Do not try me too far, I pray you. I am but a poor girl."

"And what am I but a dependent? But I will be more! So soon as I have my strength. I shall leave this place—I shall leave this country. Must I go alone, Margaret?"

"But why do you go?"

"It is my pleasure. I will not live in silken fetters, waiting for my fortune to come to me. I will carve out my own way. I will join the army; but the soft baronet shall buy no commission for me! Ha, Margaret, you are pale as death! Now do I know that I am beloved!"

He took her in his arms, and the girl did not resist his embrace. But she disengaged herself presently.

"I know not what to say," she answered, when he pressed the question. "I fear I have been a traitor to the baron's trust. He bade me stay and nurse his young kinsman, and he dreamed not of danger."

Herrick stopped her words with kisses and rapturous protestations.

"Write to the baron!" cried Margaret.

"Not I. He has naught to do with my love."

"Will he give his consent? I fear not."

"Tush, I care not! I shall not ask him! Think you, the accident of birth, that made me heir to the title and land, which my father will never claim, put me in bondage to the baron or any of his race? While my father lives, I owe obedience only to him; and he will welcome the girl I love as his daughter."

"Yet he wished to marry you to Alicia."

"He has gotten over such foolishness, as I have. Alicia is not for me. Margaret is—and I swear by Saint Andrew I will have Margaret!"

Again he clasped her in a fierce embrace.

"Let me go," she pleaded, too jealous of her new happiness, to dare indulge it.

"Not till you promise to be mine."

"If I may—without angering the noble baron—"

"Tush! you will anger me, talking thus!"

"Or grieving my dear sister Alicia—"

"Tell her all! She will not withstand me! She will be too glad to have me out of her way!" laughed the happy lover.

It was so arranged. Margaret was to write to the baron's daughter, and abide by her counsel. Her love for young Reginald, dispossessed of all save his honor, was a pledge to Herrick that she would favor his cause. And so it proved.

A long and loving letter came from the fair girl; or rather two letters; for she wrote to both. She was rejoiced that Herrick had given his heart to one so worthy. Margaret's good fortune delighted her. She would undertake to plead for them with her father, and win his consent. The letter was accompanied by a pretty bracelet, her gift to Margaret, sent by Frank Ralston.

Meanwhile Hilda had accomplished her mission, and returned to her master's place of refuge on the Continent, bearing the contributions of Matlin, Herrick and Margaret. Matlin was to remain only till Herrick's strength returned so far as to enable him to travel. The wedding was to take place before he left Scotland.

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE MEETING AT THE OPERA.

PARLIAMENT had commenced its session in London; though as yet some of the fashionables had not left their homes in the country to endure the discomforts of a March in the metropolis. There was no lack, however, of gayety in high circles.

Alicia and her father had their lodgings at a private family hotel in Berkeley square, almost exclusively patronized by the nobility.

The girl had fairly entered society, having been presented at court by a noble kinswoman, and chaperoned everywhere by Lady Northampton.

The world of fashion had its charms for her; and many suitors were at her feet. The baron felt sure of effacing the image of Reginald, in the splendid prospects, that at her consent would open before her.

The Marquis and Marchioness of Estonbury, with the dowager marchioness, were in their magnificent town-house in Piccadilly. The dowager did not as yet allow herself to be seen at balls or routs; but she accompanied her daughter in drives almost every day, and made one of the home circle in the drawing-room.

She continually urged the young wife into gay society; and Helen passively obeyed, little as she seemed to enjoy scenes of the kind. She wore the honors her marriage had won with more dignity than either her mother or her husband had anticipated.

Estonbury had never loved her, and made no pretense of doing so. So long as she did not mortify his pride, so long as she appeared at the head of his table and in public with grace and majesty sufficient to do him credit, he was content. He rarely went out with her. He was courteous to her at all times; and that surely was as much as she could expect, without any manifestation of the affection he could not feel!

Her submission to his slightest wish was the same at all times. Obedience she had promised; and she kept her vow implicitly. So gentle and complying was she in everything that he felt the yoke an easy one, and in turn was pleased to indulge her wishes whenever he learned them. This he did through the dowager. No occasion of difference had ever yet arisen.

The mother-in-law had her full swing in the exercise of power, and in social supremacy. Her daughter was subject to her; yet she kept the depths of her nature hidden even from maternal eyes. Georgiana, Lady Estonbury, could not fail to perceive that the young wife had a purpose which, should circumstances ever develop it into action, she would be powerless to shake.

They were together at the opera. Two or three gentlemen friends had joined them in their box, and were assiduous in their court to the dowager. Helen was taciturn; and seldom encouraged the attentions of their fashionable acquaintances. She sat in front, her eyes fixed on the stage, absorbed in the singing and acting of the great barytone, whose voice entranced the audience whenever it was heard.

Helen was very fond of music. It was her solace in melancholy hours, her resource in solitude. Nothing could give half the pleasure she took at the opera; and their box was always occupied when great artists appeared.

She did not notice the different visitors entering and departing, after brief conversations with her mother; till, at some interval in the music, she heard the dowager sportively rallying one of the gentlemen on his admiration for a new star in fashionable circles.

"She does, indeed, look lovely to-night! I heard of her beauty at the time she was presented. She is all the rage in a certain set."

"She should not be a belle," was the rejoinder. "Her nature is too fresh. The air of the drawing-room does not agree with her; she is most at home on her own Scottish hills."

"You are poetical, my lord," said the lady, laughing.

"With such a theme, who could wonder?" exclaimed the gentleman.

"Look at her now, receiving that bouquet from one of her worshipers," said another, who had lifted a glass to his eye.

Helen noticed the direction in which he looked, and timidly raised hers for a moment. She saw in a box nearly opposite a very beautiful young girl, whose air, dress and whole demeanor were so different from the general run of young ladies she had seen that her attention was irresistibly attracted.

"Who is that lady?" she whispered, leaning back and speaking to a gentleman near her.

"In the box opposite? I have not the pleasure of knowing the lady; but I know her name. She is the daughter of Lord Swinton, a Scottish baron."

"I have never met her!"

"Indeed! She has been out but a short time; yet she has created a marked sensation in society. I hear her toasted at the clubs."

"A protegee of Lady Northampton's," remarked the dowager, "could not fail of creating a sensation."

"But this is owing to herself. She is so young, and unspoiled by flattery; she has no wish for admiration, though it follows her the more, perhaps, for her indifference."

"Is she an heiress?"

"The barony is a poor one; ancient, but shorn of its former possessions. Her father has barely enough to maintain his standing, living at the extent of his income."

"Then she has no fortune?"

"None but her wild grace and sweetness, flowers so unused to this soil, that they charm every one," said the poetical lord who had before spoken.

"Is she a guest of Lady Northampton?" asked the dowager.

"No; but she goes everywhere with her. She is with her father; and he has no house in town."

"How I should like to call upon her!" thought the young marchioness.

Then the star of the evening again appeared, and she was absorbed in the music.

As they came out, at the conclusion of the opera, their course was stopped by several acquaintances. Some little delay occurred near the door; and quite unexpectedly and suddenly young Lady Estonbury found herself close enough to the young girl she had observed in the box to have a good view of her face. She felt at once its "wild-rose sweetness."

Alicia was surrounded by attendant gentlemen; but never did girl seem more unconscious of the admiration she excited. She was leaning on the arm of Sir Victor Wilder, and on the other side of her stood a majestic-looking lady, a peeress well known in the highest circles, who was attended by Lord Swinton.

For one instant the eyes of young Lady Estonbury met those of the fair girl, and each seemed to find in the other some attraction of the kind not expressed in ordinary acquaintanceship. Alicia's rosy lips parted in a half-smile and Helen bowed slightly, and felt the warm color rush to her face. Neither could imagine the influence one of the two was to exercise over the destinies of the other!

The dowager hurried her daughter forward, and the cry of "Lady Estonbury's carriage" was presently heard.

As the ladies ascended the stairs to their sleeping apartments, the young marchioness saw Mrs. Chisholm coming out of her mother's dressing-room. The dame turned back into the room and remained there. Helen wondered what it could mean. Chisholm was no longer one of the household, and not a frequent visitor.

Helen had not forgotten her resolution, nor the solemn vow she had taken on the eve of her marriage, though she had never since, to her mother, mentioned the name of Reginald.

She resolved to lose no time in learning what news the discharged maid had brought; for she was convinced her errand had something to do with him.

She came into the dowager's dressing-room the next morning, and asked at once the question she longed to ask; frankly avowing, when taxed by Lady Estonbury, that her interest in Reginald prompted her to ask it.

"You ought to be ashamed, Helen," her mother added, "to care for another man than your husband to whom your love belongs."

"Mother, listen to me," said the young marchioness, emphatically. "You are mistaken in supposing I love Reginald Holmes."

He went by that name, and Helen had learned the fact.

"Indeed, I feared it," said her mother. "You comfort me by the assurance that you have forgotten him."

"Nor have I forgotten him, mamma. But I know that to love him as I once did would be a sin; and I have schooled my heart. If I were free at this moment, and you gave consent, I would not marry him."

"I am glad to hear you speak so, Helen."

"But I am still interested in his fortunes—in his future. I am pledged to watch over it as if he were my own brother."

"That is but natural, child, since you were brought up together. You will be glad, then, to hear of his success."

"Tell me of it, mamma."

"Chisholm has been to see him."

"He is in London, then?"

"Yes, studying law; he has a great talent for the law. I understand."

"Well—go on!"

"Mr. Chisholm heard that he was aided by some Scottish friends, and naturally he wished to share in his good prospects."

"By what right?" asked Helen, quickly.

"Helen, you forget that the Chisholms are Reginald's parents."

"I know enough to convince me that they are not his parents," was the prompt answer.

The dowager grew very pale and grasped her daughter's arm.

"Helen, have you ever communicated to Reginald your doubts on this subject?"

"I, mother! I have never seen nor spoken to Reginald since we parted at the Court."

"Nor written—nor sent message to him?"

"Neither."

"Beware how you do so, girl! But somehow, he has the same notion. When Chisholm claimed from him a sum of money for his and his wife's support, he was coldly refused. When his wife—my maid that was—went to him to crave help on the score of relationship, he disowned her! He refused to believe she was his mother."

"On what ground?"

"His own feelings—his inward conviction."

"He is right!" cried Lady Estonbury, clasping her hands.

"Silly girl! you defend such unnatural conduct?"

"You know why I do not think he is their son. He had not the 'strawberry birth-mark,' you know."

"Helen!" cried her mother, white with rage, "if you ever dare allude to that again, you will offend me past forgiveness!"

"It was Chisholm I heard mention it as belonging to her boy."

"Silence! or I shall tell you no more."

"I will be silent. So he disowned the Chisholms?"

"Entirely; they could only get one promise from him."

"What was that?"

"That they might take and enjoy whatever it might please Lord Estonbury to bestow on him."

"Nay, mother, I know Reginald never so worded it."

"Why, my Lady Incredulous, how do you know that?"

"Because Reginald promptly declined your offer, and my lord's, of an independence. He would not, after that, make any claim."

"Chisholm, the woman I mean, spoke of your husband's willingness to assist him and he spurned it, as before."

"That is likely."

"Then she asked if he were willing they should receive my lord's bounty, as they needed it!"

"What said he?"

"That he had no claim to anything, nor would he accept anything. If they received aid from my lord it must be independent of all claims on his part, and not founded on any supposed relationship to him."

"He was right."

The dowager flashed a glance of anger on her daughter.

"He sent Chisholm away, bidding her—the unnatural monster!—never come into his presence again. But she will ask my lord for the provision the misguided young man refused."

Helen made no reply.

"Have you any objection to that?"

"I do not know—" she answered, musingly.

"At least, if Chisholm obtains money from Lord Estonbury, you will not oppose his liberality."

"No—I will not; I do not care what he gives the man or his wife."

"It was scandalous in Reginald to refuse them assistance. He is already making money by his labors; and then he is known to be intimate with the rich merchant—the India man—"

"Who?" asked the young lady.

"His name is Wallrade, I understand, though I have never seen him. He is rich and does not bear a good character."

"And Reginald is intimate with him?"

"I have heard so. His money will cover a multitude of sins, in the eyes of a needy young man."

Helen had risen to leave the room, but turned back at this; her face aflame with anger.

"If you mean, mother, that Reginald will be the friend of a bad man because he is rich," she said, "you say what is not the truth. It is not his nature. Nor would he have cast off the Chisholms, had he not been firmly convinced they had imposed on him a lie and a fraud. You know, mother, as well as I do, that he is not their son."

She left the room without another look at the dowager, who sunk into her chair, faint and trembling; her lips articulating the words:

"Can she suspect? Impossible! She knows nothing! If she did, would she drag ruin upon her own head?"

CHAPTER XXV.

A NEW FRIEND.

In the room next to that occupied by Reginald at the Temple, a strange elderly man passed many hours of every day. It was a sort of office in which he kept his papers and occasionally received a visit; sometimes, in bad weather, lodging there.

Reginald had often met him on the stairs, and had several times rendered trifling services, such as supplying him with matches, inviting him to warm himself by his fire; lending him paper, pen and ink when he happened to have none; offering the morning *Times*, etc. He saw the traces of suffering in the shrunken and slightly bent form, the deeply-lined features and sallow complexion; these were sufficient to interest him; for his compassion was readily drawn out by the evidence of sorrow or trouble of any kind.

The stranger had once or twice seemed on the verge of confidence; of communication beyond the

cold commonplaces of mere recognition; and the young man was ready to make his acquaintance. Then he had suddenly and unaccountably drawn back into silence.

Reginald, who had been interested in his intelligent countenance and the manner, so eager and impulsive that it betrayed his foreign birth, thought this strange, but he made no effort to overcome the reserve. One day, seeing the man going down-stairs before him, he had pointed him out to his friend, Frank Ralston. On a subsequent visit young Ralston remarked, carelessly:

"I heard something that surprised me concerning your neighbor. The old man is very rich."

"Indeed?"

"You would not think so from his plain dress, and his having a home here."

"His attire, though not costly, is always neat," returned Reginald. "And he has the air of a man burdened with cares. Your poor man is free from them, you know."

"He made his fortune in India, I understand."

"He is not an Englishman?"

"No; a German by birth; a thrifty person, like many of his nation."

"It is strange that he remains in London."

"He may be looking for an heir to his money. I heard something of that sort."

"Looking for an heir?"

"Or rather an heiress."

"Wanting to adopt a daughter, or to marry?"

"Hardly the last, with such a face and figure. But I heard nothing definite. You had best cultivate him," added Frank, laughing.

"Thank you; the business of heritage-hunting has no attractions for me. What you say, however, explains the reasons of his deportment toward me."

"How so?"

"We have interchanged neighborly offices; but when on the point of becoming better acquainted, he has always drawn back."

"Why? How account for that?"

"If he be rich, he naturally avoids the poor, who might become troublesome. He shrinks from a penniless young man, situated as I am."

"The greater fool if he does! Your friendship my boy, would do honor to a prince."

"You have a princely soul, Frank, to think so; but others will judge me according to my circumstances. To change the subject, I have an invitation for you. Here."

They had entered the office, and Reginald took a dainty rose-colored card from a pile of papers.

"To Lady Brandon—for Thursday."

"I owe this to you, old fellow!" cried Frank.

"Her ladyship is one of the few whose kindness has followed me in spite of my fall," said Reginald, gratefully. "If I went into any society I would attend her ball. You shall bear my excuse."

"But you must go."

Reginald shook his head, with a grave smile.

"Let me tell you where I saw her ladyship's carriage on Saturday. At T—Hotel in Berkeley square. You know who lodges there?"

"I do not know," replied Reginald.

"Baron Swinton and his daughter. I heard her ladyship's footman inquire for them."

A flush overspread the young law-student's face.

"I knew they were in London," he said.

"They are lodging at that hotel; and Lady Brandon visits them. They will be—at least the young lady will be—at her house on Thursday."

"The more reason I should not go. I have resolved not to claim the acquaintance of—of—the baron till I am in a position to meet him—them—on a footing of equality."

"You are so now, Reginald. Do genius, industry, mental power of the highest kind—noble integrity of character, constitute no claim? That reminds me—here is a letter from my father; he has again placed a sum at his banker's to your credit."

Frank drew a paper from his pocket, and handed it to Reginald, who put it back, declining to receive it.

"No, Frank; I have too long trespassed on your father's generosity. My best thanks for this new proof of his kindness; but I am earning money now; quite enough for all my expenses."

"Reginald! you will not mortify my father and me by refusing his help!"

"If I needed it—I would not; but, you see, thanks to the Laird's liberality, I am not only independent, but have excellent prospects. Do not ask me to receive aid when I can stand alone!"

Frank put back the paper with reluctance.

"You have been injuring your health by writing o' nights," he said, reproachfully.

"Do you recognize my style in the article?" asked Reginald, touching the *Times* on the table. "Well—it is only now and then. They don't employ my pen regularly."

"As well not. Your health would not stand the strain. Promise me you will not do it again."

"It was not for money. I did not need that. But I wanted to air my opinions. Don't be uneasy, Frank. When I need funds again I will apply to you."

After a little more friendly talk the friends separated.

Not half an hour afterward, Reginald heard a tap at his door. He went and opened it. The shriveled elderly man who had been the subject of their conversation stood there.

"Have you a few moments' leisure, Mr. Holmes?" he asked.

Reginald courteously bowed, and asked him to walk in. He placed a chair for him, wondering what had caused this first visit.

The visitor took the seat, laid his hat on the table, and rubbed his hands, while looking at the young lawyer.

"You are surprised to see me," he remarked,

speaking slowly; "but you will be more so when you know my errand."

Reginald looked up inquiringly.

"I have often thought, young gentleman, that your acquaintance would be a most desirable one for me, lonely as I am, and well able as you are to lend a charm to companionship and to give counsel in doubtful matters."

Again the young man bowed. There was something of fascination to him in the deference of this intelligent stranger, and he murmured an acknowledgment of the pleasure it promised him.

"I have heard your history lately," the elderly man continued; "and the story of your reverses has greatly interested me. Yours is no common character. Any honorable man might feel proud of your acquaintance."

"You are kind to say so," replied the student, feeling embarrassed, though flattered.

"I must now state my errand. I come, not to ask the honor of knowing you and being numbered among your friends, but to warn you, on no account, to receive me as an acquaintance."

Reginald looked his astonishment.

"You have shown me kindness. Beware how you go on, how you allow me to presume upon it. I may not always be able to resist the ardent desire I feel to seek your friendship."

"You speak in riddles, sir."

"I will explain; that is my object in coming. You are young, generous, and ready of access. It would be easy for a man who knows the world, like myself, to entice you into an intimacy, which would be a solace and a delight to myself. We should almost inevitably glide into something like it, being near neighbors, if I did not caution you against it."

"And why should you do so?"

"Because—because—I am unworthy to be an associate or a friend of yours."

"I cannot believe that, Mr.—"

"Wallrade is my name."

"Mr. Wallrade, I have wished to know you for some time."

"You will wish it no longer, when you know what I am."

"I have heard of you; and have heard nothing to your disadvantage."

"Few know any thing of my antecedents. I reveal them to you for a safeguard. I am a man—who has been tried for theft—and convicted."

Reginald stared as if he thought the respectable-looking elderly man had suddenly gone mad.

"Perhaps no more than one or two in Great Britain know the fact. It is nevertheless true."

"You astonish me, Mr. Wallrade."

"If you have time, I will tell you something of my past life."

Reginald signified his desire to hear it.

It is some thirty-five years ago that I was tried, as I told you; it was soon after I came to live in London. I was in pressing need of money, on an emergency that admitted of no delay. I called upon a friend who belonged to my regiment—for I had enlisted as a soldier—to borrow a few guineas. He was absent. In haste and desperation I opened his escritoir and took out ten pounds, leaving a note to say I had borrowed it and would soon pay it back. I was gone some days, and when I returned, I found the regiment in a ferment. The robbery had been discovered, and the servant of my friend was in prison, charged with the theft."

"But your note—"

"That had been lost, unfortunately. As I left it in the desk, I always thought the man suspected had afterward opened the desk for nefarious purposes; and had got the papers into confusion. I was stunned by this turn of affairs. The prisoner had insisted that he saw me leaving the escritoir; and, before I could see how to make matters straight, I was summoned for examination. My confession availed nothing; I was remanded for trial; tried and convicted, as I told you."

"On your own confession?"

"Chiefly that; but most of the bank-notes, the numbers of which were marked, were identified and traced to me. I was sentenced to the punishment of theft, but my friend, who had all along been confident of the truth of my statement, and had suffered terribly from the proceedings he had no power to stop, was indefatigable in my behalf. He obtained a pardon for me."

"A pardon! a poor compensation for the brand of crime!"

"So I thought; and I resolved to leave the country. I could not live in England with a sullied reputation; and my reckless impatience had deserved some punishment. My friend procured me a clerkship in a mercantile house and I went to India."

"And this was all!" exclaimed Reginald. "You were not guilty of crime. There is no reason why you should shun the association of honorable men, on account of that early indiscretion."

He grasped Wallrade's hand with a cordial pressure. The old man gave him a grateful look, as he proceeded:

"I will finish my outline; and then you can judge. In the midst of my trouble, one lovely lady, who learned my misfortune, took pity on me. It was owing to her intercession that my friend was able to procure the pardon; and her gentle influence raised up those who cared for me. She was a lady of rank; she bore an honored name; she was far above me; but I vowed a vow in my inmost heart, that for her sake I would devote myself to a life of useful labor."

"It was a noble resolve."

"She gave me her miniature before I left England; see, I have it here, fastened to my watch."

"He drew out a small locket of fine wrought gold, depending on a slender gold chain."

It opened with a spring. The face disclosed was that of a beautiful and very young girl. Reginald

examined it with much interest; for the features were strangely familiar to him.

"I see what you are thinking of; you are mistaken. There was no love in the case. The lady—she was very young—almost a child—pitied me as the angels pity the doomed; I worshiped her as a patron saint. Years afterward I heard of her marriage to a noble lord; and I ventured to send from India a rich shawl, manufactured for a princess—of which I begged her acceptance."

"I served my employers well; I was made a partner; I became rich. My blight was unknown; I was esteemed among all who knew me. I formed the acquaintance of one young Englishman of noble family, who was an officer in the army; but compelled to leave it on account of failing health. I nursed him through a severe illness; and he persuaded me to accompany him to England, when he was ordered home."

"Who was he?"

"His name was Egbert Vane. We made the voyage together; at least part of it; for the ship was wrecked, and most of those on board perished."

"How dreadful! You both escaped!"

"It was upon a hidden reef that we had been driven. I was swept into the sea when the ship went to pieces; but I managed to grasp a few loose spars, and tied them together with some cordage I got from the wreck. I had just shoved the raft clear from the reef, when a drowning man was swept within reach of my hands; and I clutched him by the hair. I dragged him upon the raft; he was insensible, but I brought him to with a few drops of brandy, and a little chafing."

"Then I bade him secure himself to the raft. Not till morning dawned, did I know whom I had saved. It was Egbert Vane."

"Providential, indeed."

"I will attempt no description of our experience, driven by wind and wave far from the sight of men, and without provisions, on a frail raft. We looked only for death; but we were destined to live. On the fourth day a vessel picked us up, in a state of exhaustion nigh to death."

"Again providential!" exclaimed Reginald, deeply interested.

"It was a German vessel, bound to a German port. We were landed, but poor Egbert was too ill to travel far. I was again his nurse, and when he was well enough, we went into the mountains for the benefit of his health."

"Who would dare to call you heartless?"

"We were like brothers; but my companion soon found one whom he could love with a deeper and warmer love. She was very beautiful, but of humble birth."

"When I saw that Egbert was becoming attached to her, I remonstrated with him. I showed him that he could not honorably court a girl in her station. But he would not regard my warnings. The intimacy grew and continued, though the meetings of the two were concealed from me."

"Imprudent, certainly."

"At last I went to see the young girl, who lived with her mother at Kaiserswerth on the Rhine. I warned her against the danger; I felt for her unprotected situation; and I remembered how the loveliest of her sex had succored me."

"How did she receive your caution?"

"With haughty courtesy; thanking me for my good intentions, but assuring me that she was able to take care of herself. Egbert discovered what I had done, and we had a quarrel."

"Such interference seldom avails much."

"I reproached him, and he did not deny that he meant never to give up the maiden. He attributed to jealousy all I had done. Thus we parted; parted forever."

"What did he do?"

"I never learned. I never cared to inquire. I went to another part of Germany, and thence came to England. Once, since, I have revisited the place where we spent so many months, happy in each other's friendship; and where that ill-starred love-affair ran its course. I could not help inquiring after her."

"What had become of her?"

"Both she and Egbert were dead. She had died first. His constitution, undermined in India, and shattered by the shock and exposure of the shipwreck, gave way gradually. I was taken to the spot where he had been buried."

"A sad termination to his romance! Was he not brought to his friends in this country?"

"Strange, it appeared to me, that he was not. They told me his brother had come over and was with him at the last. It may have been his preference to be buried near the girl he had so madly loved. I never knew. I heard, after I came to England, that both he and I—with all those in the ship on board of which we sailed from India—had been reported drowned. Three or four of the sailors had escaped in the long-boat, and brought the news."

"Thus you could begin life afresh."

"I could have changed my name; but I did not. Very few remembered me after so many years. My fault was forgotten. I had my ample fortune, safe in the bank that held the deposits of my mercantile house. Only one amusement I suffered to become a pastime, and that has procured me the reprobation of the censorious. I have played now and then."

"Played—at cards?"

"You are shocked? Well—I deserve blame. I used to play in Germany; and the excitement was a solace to me. I never risk large sums, however; and all I win is given to the poor."

"It is a dangerous practice."

"With a young man; hardly with me. What can I do, without an object of interest in life?"

"Make one for yourself. You may find abundant material."

"Too late! too late! Only one hope remains."

"What is that?"

"The beautiful young lady who once gave me hope when most in despair; who gave me energy to commence a new life; I panted to do something for her. She is dead. But she has left a child; a daughter; lovely as herself, and as full, no doubt, of tender compassion. Her father, I hear, has lost a large part of the fortune his ancestors enjoyed; and what he has is strictly entailed on the male heir. He has no son. His daughter, therefore, will be unprovided for."

"Ha! there is an object for your energies, for your gratitude."

"Is it so easy to go to this young and lovely creature, lay my fortune at her feet, and have it accepted? She would reject it with wonder that a stranger—who has no repute among men—should dare approach her. Her father has the pride of high rank. He might reject my acquaintance."

"Shall I give you my advice? Shake off any habits that, as you say, may render scrupulous persons shy of you. Be in seeming what you are in nature; then seek the friendship of this noble, impoverished man of rank. He will not hesitate to welcome you to his home and his heart."

"Think you so, young man? And you, are you willing to be my friend, now that you know all?"

"I accept your friendship with thanks. I shall be proud of it."

The German drew one hand across his eyes. Reginald had grasped the other in the warm impulse of his emotion.

"As Heaven blesses me with reason, I will take your counsel, young friend. You have saved me from myself. But are you sure you will be firm, when you hear me reproached as a man who has frequented gambling-houses; whose good character no one can vouch for?"

"I have no fear. Evil rumor may follow you, even after you have won the right to a spotless name. But you will conquer at last."

"Will you help me?"

"Whatever I can do, in that you may command me."

"A thousand thanks! You give me hope again. May Heaven bless you for it!"

CHAPTER XXVI.

A MAN'S HONOR.

In spite of his stern resolve, Reginald accepted the invitation to Lady Brandon's ball.

He could not resist the temptation of seeing once more the object of his love, even though he must look upon her as a star moving in a sphere far above him. Once more to see her, and then he would be resigned to his destiny.

So he thought as he came in late, into the thronged drawing-rooms, sumptuous with the splendor of wealth and taste can create, and brilliant with the hundred of wax-lights gleaming on gorgeous attire and smiling fair faces.

It was a bewildering scene, though the young man had been used to the gayeties of social life, and saw many familiar faces, and heard many voices of old friends.

He had lost no social standing by the change in his prospects. Had he chosen to avail himself of the attentions proffered he would even have been a lion in society; but he shrunk from distinction of that kind. He was welcomed with frank cordiality by the hostess, and soon found himself in the grasp of Lord Estonbury, who insisted on taking him to the dowager and his young wife.

"It is your own fault, Reginald," he said, with a patronizing air, not a little repulsive, "that we see nothing of you. No friend would be more welcome."

The dowager repeated the assurance with elaborate courtesy.

Young Lady Estonbury merely bowed in silence, and held out her hand. But she watched him with deep interest. It seemed to her that he had grown handsomer and more distinguished-looking than ever.

The marquis intimated that he had something of importance to say, and proceeded to caution his young friend against forming an acquaintance with a suspicious person, with whom he had met him once, walking in the park.

"His name is Wallrade," he continued, "and I am sure he is a gambler; for I have heard it of him. Beware of being seen with him. The acquaintance would ruin your prospects."

Reginald felt his resentment rise at this rebuke; but he made no reply, only with cold thanks for a repeated invitation, moving hastily away.

Helen gazed after him. She was looking well this evening, in a silk of pale rose-color, with full overskirt of delicate point lace, looped with white rose-buds. There were natural rose-buds in her hair and pearls on her neck and arms. She was very pale, and her eyes had that dark depth they showed when she was under the influence of emotion.

The dowager Lady Estonbury was attired in a rich purple corded silk with black lace flounces, bertha, and flowing sleeves. She wore jet and diamond ornaments, being in mourning.

Both ladies were beset with introductions, and claimants for their attention.

The young marchioness, eager to escape the watchful eyes of her mother, took advantage of the offered escort of a young earl, and had a promenade through the room. She was anxious not to lose sight of Reginald.

He moved on, greeted by friends at every step, and smiled on by the fair. Only a few middle-aged mothers looked coldly on the young man whom they had courted so assiduously scarcely a year since.

His handsome face and grand manners must not bewitch their daughters.

At one end of the last room stood a group that instantly attracted Reginald's attention. Alicia Maur was the central figure, and the object of general admiration.

She was dressed entirely in white, a filmy, cloud-like lace, that floated in airy puffs from the outline of her slender and graceful form. She wore no bracelets, nor any ornament save an old-fashioned pearl brooch containing her mother's hair. Her own waving, light-brown locks, gleaming like gold in the light, fell from the restraining ribbon gathering them at the back of her head, to her neck, and clustered in delicate rings around her temples. Her blue eyes sparkled, and a faint rose-flush was in her cheeks. The homage paid her on every side was evidently gratifying to her pride.

Several gentlemen, among them the young Duke of Montroy, whose devotion to the fair girl had been the talk of gossips for weeks past, were in lively conversation with the belle of the evening. The duke held her bouquet, and waited to lead her to the dance. His eyes were fixed on her lovely face with an earnest admiration no one could mistake, for young love makes its first language understood.

Alicia, thus lightly toying with the scepter of Beauty's empire over hearts, was unconscious that two persons were steadfastly regarding her with different feelings from the devoted gallants in her immediate circle.

Reginald stood leaning against a pillar, pale as death, his eyes devouring her face.

The intense craving of his soul was satisfied—he saw her, in all her beauty, once again. But how? As far removed from him as if she were enshrined in some fair planet of the sky! She looked, in his eyes, like an angel just touching the earth for the poise of an instant. And he might as well expect to capture the winged inhabitant of the empyrean, as to claim her attention. Yet he could not take his eyes from her face; though over his own crept an expression of deep anguish, darkening into despair.

Helen, still leaning on the arm of Lord Clair, looked from Reginald's face to the beaming one of Alicia, and a conviction flashed upon her mind that the two were known to each other, and that here was the maiden who had won Reginald's love.

She felt irresistibly impelled to learn more. She led the way by slow and interrupted movements toward Reginald, and when near enough, touched his arm with her fan.

"Will you do me a favor, Reginald?"

"Lady Estonbury!" he exclaimed, starting nervously. Then bowed courteously, and added: "Pray command me, in any way I can serve you!"

"It is to introduce me to yonder lady! I saw her at the opera; I am anxious to make her acquaintance."

She had dropped Lord Clair's arm, and was now close to Reginald. He hesitated, and she went on impetuously:

"The young girl in white, standing by the Duke of Montroy, and talking to so many. There! she has taken a seat. It is the only opportunity. Take me to her."

"You must excuse me, Lady Estonbury," replied the young man, drawing back as Helen was about to take his arm.

"You know her certainly," cried she. "I have seen you looking at her. Why will you not present me?"

"I knew the lady—formerly," was the proud answer; "but I could not now take the liberty of presenting a friend to her."

"Who is she?"

"Miss Alicia Maur, the daughter of Lord Swinton, of Scotland."

"It is unkind of you, Reginald! I am so anxious to know her. I am charmed with her already!"

"I regret that I cannot oblige your ladyship," said the young man, coldly. "It would be presumption in me. A hundred persons here can have the honor. There is Sir Victor Wilder. Shall I bring him to you?"

"No, no—'tis no matter," replied Helen, as she saw Miss Maur rise and take the duke's arm. The music had struck up for a dance, and the partners were taking their places. The circle of courtly young men looked disappointed, as the fair girl passed through.

Helen glanced at Reginald. He had averted his face; and before she could speak to him, he had moved away. She watched him anxiously, forgetting her request. She knew that she need have no difficulty in being introduced to the young lady when the dance was over; but, somehow, her desire had grown cold.

She stood by a French window, draped with embroidered lace, over rich folds of damask silk. The music had a lulling effect, and Helen took a seat on the cushioned lounge and drew the drapery before her. It was a relief to escape for a time the necessity of playing a part in the social drama, artificial as she felt it to be. She gave herself up to thinking, and presently lost the hearing of sounds within the room.

The window was in a recess, and opened on a narrow balcony leading to the splendid conservatories, now in the first opening bloom that precedes the burst of spring. The atmosphere was so heated that the young marchioness felt a grateful relief when she could open one of the sides of the window and let in the fresh air. She had not noted the cessation of the music, and the regular steps of the promenaders.

She saw two figures glide slowly past outside, and instantly started to her feet.

They were Alicia Maur and Reginald. The look she caught on his face almost frightened Helen.

She quickly pushed the glass door open, passed out and followed them.

CHAPTER XXVII.

LOVE'S OWN SWEET WAY.

THE two figures descended the marble steps at the end of the balcony. These led into a spacious court, refreshed by a fountain, with clear basin in which aquatic plants were growing, and set out with orange, lemon and ornamental trees.

Helen saw the flutter of a white dress at the further end, at the entrance of the long conservatory, and without giving herself time for thought, hastened after the pair.

The warm air of the hot-house, loaded with fragrance, made her pant for breath; but she did not pause till she saw the persons she was pursuing, stop in a nook sheltered by an oriental tree with drooping boughs in full leaf.

Helen was concealed behind the tall vases that held flowering shrubs not yet in bloom.

She did not once think of the strangeness of her chase, and of her listening to the conversation of those who thought themselves alone. Her early training under the Chisholms' care, had never taught her that such conduct was unbecoming a lady; and her desire to know everything had its root in a good motive.

"Reginald!" she heard Alicia say, "why have you brought me here in this hurried manner? We can speak together in the drawing-rooms—"

"I cannot speak to you there!" exclaimed the young man, in a tone that betrayed the bitter agony that he was suffering. "Oh, Alicia! I should not dare to speak to you at all."

"But it would have grieved me if you had not, dear Reginald! I was so delighted to see you!"

"I will ask only five minutes! It will do me good, Alicia, to hear from your lips, what I have read in your looks to-night, that you have cast off all remembrance of me!"

"That I have cast off remembrance of you—Reginald! And it will do you good to know it!"

"It will crush presumptuous hope forever. I thought I could resign you calmly, but I know by what I have suffered to-night, that the task is one in which you must aid me. Chide my presumption, Alicia! Tell me that the beggar who dares yet lift his eyes to you, merits your scorn!"

"Reginald! did I not promise to be true to you?"

"That was before you could see how deep and hopeless is my fall! Before you knew your own power! What have I seen? You *enjoy* the homage that waits on every step of yours! You receive messages of love from a suitor's eyes, and do not repel them!"

"You are unjust to me! Indeed you are! I have received no love messages!"

"Ha! is not the young Duke of Montroy your slave? Alicia, I have given you up, but I cannot tear your image from its throne in my heart, *till you bid me do it!* Do not deceive me! It is cruel to the condemned man to allow him to hope!"

"It is you who are cruel to me! Why do you look at me, as if I were about to stab you to the heart?"

"If you did that, it would be a merciful blow."

"Reginald, I have not deserved this! I have done nothing to justify you in saying that I am false to my vows."

"Are you not, in heart and wis?"

"No, indeed! If you would give me opportunity, I would convince you beyond a doubt. But you never came near us. You knew I was in London; why have you kept aloof?"

"A welcome visitor I should have been!"

"Always welcome; always, to me, Reginald!"

"Pardon me, Alicia; I have no right to reproach you. I am worse than presumptuous to expect kind remembrance from you!"

"Reginald, you have rights over me which no other man has, or could ever gain."

He put out his hand in deprecation.

"Do not, do not madden me by hope. Rather crush out my love—as you must despise it!"

"Reginald, have you not cast me off? Are you not false to the troth you plighted?"

"Alicia!"

"I have thought so at times. I have been sorely tried, in believing that you had ceased to love me."

"You could believe it?"

"How could I help it? when you never came near me? when you seemed not to care if I lived or not?"

"Was it for me to aspire to your favor, when the highest nobles in the land were at your feet?"

"If they were—what were they to me in comparison with you?"

"Have a care, Alicia! I could not bear again to fall from such a pinnacle of bliss as you would raise me to, by the assurance of your love."

The girl arose from her seat, and with a simple action of exquisite grace, placed her hand in his.

"Reginald, never again doubt that I love you! and you alone!"

He clasped her in his arms.

They understood each other at last. Then Alicia told him how deeply she had been wounded by his seeming neglect, and had attributed it to the decrease of affection. The pride he had stung had been soothed by the homage of others. She disclaimed, passionately, having ever wandered, even in thought, for an instant, from her heart's allegiance to her chosen lord.

"Hear me now, Reginald!" she concluded. "For a time I must be guided by my father's wishes. But he shall never compel me to break my faith pledged once, and pledged forever, to you. I can love no other; I will wed no other. Go on, in your upward path, my own beloved! Trust my inviolate

truth, and be patient, even if we wait years for our happiness!"

The young man was kneeling beside her, his arms clasped round her waist, as he poured out the overflowing joy that had taken the place of despair.

Helen, embarrassed and afraid, was thinking how she could escape to the drawing-rooms.

Suddenly Alicia lifted her head from her lover's shoulder.

"We must part now, my beloved. But you shall come and visit me, will you not?"

"Will your father—"

"I will answer for him. He will not condemn his child to misery. If he should be unkind, we will meet elsewhere, my Reginald."

Another fond embrace, and Alicia disengaged herself quickly.

"Leave me now. They will send to look for me. For my sake—go! I hear footsteps!"

Reginald was gone.

The footsteps passed on. The girl sunk back, overcome with the agitation she had undergone.

Helen thought she had fainted, and sprang to her assistance. Her head lay back on the settee; her eyes were closed, and she was pale as marble.

The young marchioness drew her close to herself, supported her in her arms, and placed her head on her own shoulder, chafing one of her cold hands between her own.

Presently Alicia revived, and regained full consciousness. She started at perceiving who held her so tenderly. She drew herself up, with a murmured apology for causing so much trouble.

"Say nothing," replied Helen. "Are you quite restored? or shall I get you a cup of water, from that fountain?"

"Thank you; I am better. How—came you here?"

"I have been close to you for some time. I was behind those vases."

The girl started, and the crimson rushed to her face.

"Yes. I heard you and Reginald. I know that you love each other; and I know that he deserves you."

"You know him!" cried Alicia, starting up.

"I am his—sister."

"His sister? I never heard that he had a sister."

"Not his sister in blood; but—but—we were brought up together. I have loved him as a brother from childhood; and—I love you—because you are his."

Alicia drooped her head. She could not quite understand what she heard.

"Will you not be my friend?" asked Helen, softly.

"At least for his sake?"

"I thank you, lady," answered the girl, with a grateful look.

"May I call you friend? Will you let me kiss you?"

With a sudden impulse Alicia flung her arms round Helen's neck, and burst into a passion of sobbing and tears.

The marchioness soothed her with loving tenderness. She told her how she had been attracted to her at the opera, and how she had asked Reginald to introduce her, in the drawing-room.

"But he was gloomy and despairing then," she added. "You have made him happy now; and I love you for it."

How bright was the smile Alicia cast on the kind young stranger.

"I know where you live!" Helen went on. "I will come to see you. I have so much to say. Reginald has enemies; and they are wronging him; but you and I together will foil them."

There were hurrying footsteps, and this time coming rapidly toward them.

The young Earl of Clair came upon the pair.

"Lady Estonbury! I have been looking everywhere for you! Your mother is anxious, and sent me to find you!"

Both the ladies rose. Alicia with extreme surprise in her face, and drawing back from Helen a pace or two.

"Is this Lady Estonbury?" she exclaimed.

"A singular question!" replied the young man, laughing, "when I find you arm-in-arm, sitting like a pair of turtle-doves! Lady Estonbury, will you honor me?"

He offered his arm. Helen replied:

"If Miss Maur will accept our escort back! Some of her friends will have missed her."

With thanks Alicia took the arm of the young marchioness, and the three passed out.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

ANOTHER DISCOVERY.

AT three in the afternoon of the succeeding day, young Lady Estonbury was alone in the library.

She was occupied in turning over the leaves of an illustrated folio upon the long table; but her thoughts were elsewhere. The scene she had witnessed the evening before was vivid before her. The fair young girl in her cloud-like white dress, her glowing face like the face of an angel; the young lover, with the change from despair to rapture in his countenance! She felt an ardent wish to make those two happy.

No feeling of jealousy nor sense of rivalry marred her desire to remove the obstacles to their union. She loved Reginald as a sister; and her knowledge that some fraud was practiced against him, which she could not penetrate, gained strength as she reflected.

After a while she closed the folio and sauntered to the windows, draped heavily with dark green satin, the folds of which lay in rich masses on the carpet. She parted these, and looked out.

The last slant rays of sunset were gilding the trees in the park opposite. The contrast of tints was

pleasing to an artistic eye. The wind stirred the foliage and brushed the twigs against the windows; but the spacious room, warmed by a large sea-coal fire, was of a soft, luxurious temperature. The marchioness wheeled a large cushioned leathern chair to the fire, and went into one of the alcoves to get a book.

The volumes were richly bound in an old-fashioned style, and were rather large for handling by the delicate fingers of a lady. They were so tightly set together that Helen found difficulty in moving them. But the title in letters of gold on the back inspired curiosity to examine their contents. After several efforts she loosened one volume, and took it out.

When she went to replace it, she was obliged to move the next volume. As she pulled it forward, something fell behind it, and resisted attempts to push back the book. She drew it out to see what the obstacle was.

It was a case about six inches square of morocco, discolored by age and covered with dust. Helen wiped away the dust, and looked for the fastening. Opening it, she started in surprise; then took it to the window to examine more carefully.

It disclosed a fine painting; a miniature; the face of a beautiful young woman. The hair and the dress had a foreign and antiquated look; but the features were exquisitely defined, and the complexion fresh as the hue of life.

Helen gazed at it in profound astonishment; for the features were familiar to her. But for the difference in sex, she would have been certain it was the face of Reginald Holmes!

The regular and noble outline, the broad, placid forehead, the rounded chin, were the very same. The eyes—those wonderful eyes—dark gray, with their penetrative power, were so like his own, that hers drooped involuntarily. Yes, it was Reginald's face; and beyond a doubt, painted for some relative of his. Who could it be?

In the left hand corner was faintly traced a name. Helen could not make out that of the painter; but "Dusseldorf" was perfectly plain. On the back of the picture, which was in a light frame of polished wood, was an inscription in writing—very old-fashioned writing: "*Almeria to Egbert*," with the date—18—

Strange enough! The portrait had evidently been painted in Germany, and twenty-four years ago! Whom could it represent?

It had lain many years forgotten, where the young lady had found it. It looked like none of the ancestral portraits in the stately gallery of the town mansion, or in the picture-room at Estonbury Court.

It resembled only one person Helen had ever seen; and it was so like him as to preclude the idea of a mere chance resemblance.

Her first impulse was to show it to her mother and ask information; but as a new idea occurred to her, she resolved to conceal her discovery. She hid the picture in the folds of her dress as she heard carriage-wheels without, and the voices of servants, a token that the dowager marchioness had returned from her drive.

Her ladyship complained of the cold as she came in.

Helen heard her ask for herself, and heard the answer given that she was in the library. Presently the door was thrown open, and her mother entered.

"Bless me, Helen, what are you doing here? Poring over these books, as usual! It is very cold; give me that chair!"

And she sunk into the luxurious cushions, and held out her hands to feel the warmth of the glowing fire.

After ten minutes or so of desultory conversation, Helen felt the desire to learn something that might throw light on her discovery, too strong to be resisted.

"Mamma," she said, after a fit of musing, "is there an 'Egbert' in our family?"

"What do you mean, child?" cried her ladyship, startled.

"Is there any one of the name of Egbert? or was it one of papa's names?"

"What a strange question! Of course not. Why do you ask?"

"I—I—have seen the name."

"Where?" demanded the lady, rising out of her chair, and confronting her daughter, who hesitated to reply.

"Where have you seen that name?" she repeated.

"I cannot tell, exactly, where; but I think I have seen it," answered Helen.

Her reluctance to answer, her excitement, inspired her mother with suspicion. She fixed her eyes severely on her face, and laid her hand on her arm.

"Helen—you are prevaricating! Tell me at once where you saw that name, or who has been talking of him to you?"

"Of him? Then there was such a person?"

The young lady determined to confess nothing. She felt that a clew was in her hands.

"Indeed, mamma, I cannot tell you whether I heard or saw the name. I merely asked if papa had it, as I know he had other names besides the one you called him by every day?"

"It never was his—such a name."

"Did it belong to any of his relatives?"

The dowager glanced around the room. Her eyes fell on a quaintly-carved oaken cabinet, clamped with iron at the corners, and black with time, that stood in the further corner of the library.

"You have been poring over old papers, I suppose," she said. "I wonder if that cabinet is locked?"

Going to it, she found that the door of the cabinet was locked. She turned to Helen.

"Have you been searching in this?" she asked.

The young lady laughed a forced laugh.

"No, indeed, madam. I am not so fond of rummaging among dusty, mouldering papers. I do not even know what is there! I believe it belonged to—my father; did it not?"

"Yes; and it should have been cleared out long since. But something must have put that name in your head!"

"It is of no consequence, since it did not belong to any of the family! I only wanted to know if there was such a person, and—whom he married—if he had a wife."

The dowager grew very pale as she looked scrutinizingly at her daughter. At length she said:

"You seem always trying to grub up something, Helen. I wish you would turn your attention to matters of practical life. Have you answered those invitations to dinner at Lady Roscoe's?"

"No, mamma."

"They must be written before dark. Come with me and write them in my dressing-room."

Helen mechanically followed her mother up the grand staircase.

Excusing herself for a moment, she hurried on to her own chamber and consigned the picture she had found to her private ebony desk. For greater security, she put it between the false bottom of the escritoir and the woodwork. Then she locked the desk, and tying the key to a ribbon, put it in her bosom.

"There is something behind all this," she murmured to herself, recalling her mother's strange disturbance. "I will find it all out. I will see the contents of that cabinet."

She went then into her mother's room, and wrote notes for her till it was time to dress for dinner.

His lordship came in rather late, and joined them at dinner. It was not his invariable custom to be present at that sociable repast. He was unusually communicative this evening.

"I met that young fellow again in the Park with Wallrade," he observed, as he pared a hot-house peach at the dessert. "He pays no heed to my advice."

"The young fellow," Helen knew, was no other than Reginald. Her eyes were cast down, but she listened with the more earnest attention.

"And I have been thinking," the marquise proceeded, "that I do not like his studying law. He has decided talent, I am told; and as a barrister his antecedents will be perpetually dragged up. That story of the birth-chamber were better let drop."

"Can you not help him into some other line?" asked the dowager.

"I might. I have influence with the minister. He might be provided for in the diplomatic line."

"If you were to offer a large annuity, on condition he accepted some office—"

"There's the difficulty! he will take nothing! I have offered to settle a handsome income on him; I did it at first. I can only manage the matter through the minister, or some nobleman who can be got to use interest for him. Confound his pride!"

"What beggars have to do with pride," said the dowager, spitefully, "is more than I can understand."

Helen flashed a glance at her mother, but did not dare trust herself to utter the thought in her mind—that the pride of manly worth and independence was far above the pride of birth or fortune.

"He will not come here," pursued his lordship, "though I have lowered myself to invite him. He declined the invitation to dinner last week."

"I wish he would leave the country," said the lady, fretfully. "I shall decline society, if he is to be an eye-sore wherever I go."

"Oh, mamma!" exclaimed Helen, "we have never met him in company, except that one night at Lady Brandon's ball."

Her mother gave her a severe look, but made no answer; and presently the party rose from table, and adjourned to the drawing-room.

Helen took her place at the piano; but soon quit- ted it for the harp. She was a proficient at the latter instrument. She drew it near the fire, on the side opposite to that where sat the dowager and his lordship. While her fingers wandered over the strings, bringing them to perfect tune, her ear caught much of the low-toned conversation near her.

Her mother had been telling Lord Estonbury of her singular question concerning the name of "Egbert," and both appeared to attach significance to it, far beyond what such a trifle deserved.

Lady Estonbury whispered something Helen could not hear; and then said:

"The old papers my husband left ought to be destroyed, if they are not important enough to be preserved. I know he never kept there any deeds or money documents; his solicitors had charge of those. There were only old letters, and such rubbish, of no use to any one."

"I will see to it," replied the marquise.

"And without delay! I should not want those papers overhauled by any curious stranger."

The son-in-law answered, musingly:

"I have to go into Devonshire to-morrow; at least—"

"Pray do not leave the business to me!" cried his mother-in-law. "I cannot bear to touch moldy parchments and such like! It would give me a chill. And if I came across anything about that European—"

"Hush!" whispered the marquise. "I will look over the papers to-night. I shall not probably find anything of value."

"He never kept such here; nor at the Court. He had a safe at his solicitors' for business papers."

"Very well; I shall soon make clean work."

His lordship rose, stretched his limbs, and walked once or twice across the vast and sumptuous suit of

drawing-rooms. Then he rung the bell, and ordered extra lights for the library.

It was common for him to do any writing or examine a book in the evening. He left the drawing-room, after another whispered direction from the dowager.

In a few minutes Helen let her harp lean back, and then arose from her seat.

She was uneasy, but dared not suffer her disturbance to be visible.

She asked whither my lord had gone.

Her mother replied that she had heard him say he had something to do in the library. It surely could not be matter of surprise that he should leave her alone. He rarely spent an evening with them.

The excuse for leaving the room which Helen was longing for came at last with her maid at the door, asking some direction, which she hastened out, to give.

Then she flew down the stairs. She opened the library door softly, and glided in.

Lord Estonbury was at the cabinet, which he had just opened, as there had been some difficulty in finding the key. He was taking out package after package of old papers, apparently letters, and laying them on a table near.

He looked up, and saw his wife, as she stood by the fire, looking into the glowing bed of coals.

"You here, Helen!" he said, surprised.

"I wanted to ask you, Maurice," she returned, "if you will not go with me to Lady Roscoe's dinner! I have written an acceptance for you."

"That you need not have done; for I shall not be in London."

"Shall you leave town before Wednesday?"

"I may—to-morrow; certainly the next day."

"I am so sorry!" she murmured, in a tone of chagrin. "It is long since we were at dinner together."

"My absence does not seem to stand much in the way of your enjoyment, usually," his lordship observed, with a sneer.

"More than you think, Maurice. I do not like to be neglected, when it is my first season in London."

"Oh, you will get used to it. Why do you not so-lace yourself in the manner of Mrs. Brittan, or Lady Craighlethorne?"

"Would you have your wife a flirt?" she asked, in genuine astonishment.

"As well as not. You would never carry matters to the point of danger. You are not pretty enough."

"And I hope I have too much principle, or pride, at least. You shall never complain that I have brought discredit on your name, my lord."

"I am not afraid of it—in that way."

"In that, or any other!"

"Some day I may read you a lesson on the necessity of controlling your impulses, keeping down your curiosity, or bridling your tongue."

"You have nothing to fear, I am sure. You never intrust me with any secrets; so how could I betray them!"

"If I had any, I should guard them carefully from you."

"And as to my curiosity, I have not even asked you what you are doing there now?"

"You can see for yourself. I am sparing the rats and worms some trouble. These things would not interest you."

"I do not know. Will you let me help you sort them?"

"No; I shall find that easy enough."

He took up an armful of the musty documents, came to the fire, and laid them upon the coals. The fire leaped up and seized them. The marquise pushed them down with the poker, and watched till the last scrap was consumed.

"What records of the heart, or of the busy, scheming brain you have ruthlessly consigned to oblivion!" observed Helen, with a light laugh.

The marquise noted the ring of duplicity in her words; and sneered again, as he answered:

"Have you been here before me, Helen, that you look on so coolly?"

"Certainly not. I have no fondness for such musty researches. Why do you think I have?"

"Only that I think your early training may have nourished a prying disposition."

It was not the first time her lord had taunted his young wife with her breeding as the child of menials, and she usually resented it. But now she merely answered:

"My early training taught me submission, or I should not be silent under injustice. And you will not let me assist you? Then I might as well relieve you of my presence."

She sauntered slowly toward the corner where her lord was still busily engaged. The doors of the cabinet were still wide open, and she could see that its contents were all removed.

Drawer after drawer, reopened, was seen to be empty. The work of disinterring the records was complete.

Again the marquise gathered up a heap of papers, and threw them on the fire, with a deeply-drawn sigh of relief. When they were consumed, he flung himself into the easy-chair, and wiped his hands with his cambric handkerchief.

Helen came near the fire again.

"I suppose, now," she said playfully, "you mean to give me that old desk for my voluminous correspondence."

"No, it is too black and antiquated. A lady should keep her letters in polished rosewood, ebony, or an Indian cabinet, perfumed daintily. I will find some sort of use for yon relic."

There was a knock at the door, and the footman entered, with two cards upon a silver chased tray, which he presented to his master.

"Ay, I had forgotten that these gentlemen were to call," the marquise observed. "Show them into

the drawing-room. I must wash my hands before joining them."

He walked to the cabinet and closed it; then with the poker made sure that nothing remained of what he had consigned to the blaze.

Then he quitted the room with a single glance at Helen as he went, and a smile that seemed to say how completely he had baffled her.

No sooner did she hear his steps ascending the stairs, than the young marchioness was at the cabinet.

The rusty key was yet in the lock; it was not even turned.

She opened the doors, but the space within was vacant. Only a thick atmosphere of dust—the dust of more than a score of years, that irritated her delicate nostrils and caused her to draw back more than once.

She pulled open one drawer after another, and inspected the pigeon-holes, thrusting in her hand to feel if there was nothing behind them.

In one of them she felt a sharp prick, and snatching out her hand, saw that the skin was broken and a drop of blood fell from the wound. She wrapped her handkerchief round it, and again felt round the back of the receptacle. It was the center one.

Her fingers came in contact with what seemed the broad head of a nail not driven fast into the wood-work. She pressed upon it with all her force. Something flew out and struck her face with such violence that she recoiled in spite of her resolution.

It was a small secret drawer, and contained some folded papers. These had evidently escaped the observation of the marquis.

Helen gathered them up quickly, and crammed them into her pocket, with a guilty glance around the room.

No one had seen her, and she breathed freely.

She finished her survey of the empty cabinet, then closed the doors, leaving the key in the lock. After a few minutes spent in trying to calm her agitated nerves, she left the room, and went up to her own apartments.

There was no one there. She passed through the boudoir and sitting-room into the bed-chamber, where a light was burning on the marble table. She locked and bolted both doors before she sat down, and with a beating heart drew out the treasures she had secured.

They were two letters written in a delicate lady's hand, and in pale ink, on paper yellow with age. She could make out no more than the date, which was twenty-three years back. The letters were in German.

There was a folded piece of tissue paper, containing two curls of hair—one long and golden, as if cut from a woman's head, one lighter and shorter, evidently an infant's.

There was another paper, which she unfolded, and started as she read it:

"The attested certificate of the marriage of Egbert Vane with Almeria Stenhaus."

CHAPTER XXIX.

FOLLOWING THE CLEW.

ALICIA MAUR was alone in the drawing-room belonging to their suit of apartments at the hotel in Berkeley Square. She was finishing a drawing from memory; the pretty bit of landscape about the Roman well near her Scottish home. The spot was endeared to her by thoughts of her love.

That morning Lord Swinton had laid before her the proposal of the young Duke of Montroy.

It would be a grand match, he assured her, and he did not conceal the fact that his pride and his dearest wishes for her would be gratified by her acceptance.

He told her of the impoverishment of the once magnificent estates of his own ancient house, and his cherished hopes that she would by a brilliant marriage, regain the social elevation and worldly grandeurs which he could not secure for her.

The property pertaining to his barony, limited as it was, was entailed on the male heir, and he had never been able to save from his income anything to make a suitable provision for his child.

"It is my deep anxiety for your future, dearest girl," he added, "that makes me a special advocate in the cause of his grace."

Alicia laid one arm across her father's neck as he sat in the easy-chair, and stooped to touch his cheek with her lips.

"Darling papa," she pleaded, "I know you think more of my happiness than ought else."

"Happiness for a young lady in your position, my daughter, depends very much on external circumstances. High rank and wealth are powerful adjuncts."

"But not essentials, papa."

"They are, to one bred as you have been. You cannot know what you would be, or how you would feel, if suddenly deprived of your present share of these advantages."

"Indeed—"

"In the event of my death, child—you having no fortune—you would be friendless and destitute."

"I hope I shall not live to see that event," cried Alicia, clasping his neck with both arms.

"In the course of nature you will; and it is my duty to look possibilities in the face."

"Do not, dearest papa. Think of something more agreeable."

"I must think for you, child. I have nothing to leave you. You would be a dependent on the bounty of a distant relative—"

"And one turned against me, too," added the girl, flushing. "I know it, papa."

"Here is an opportunity to repair the evils we have dreaded. The duke will make liberal settlements; and his wealth is prodigious."

The girl shuddered.

"Oh, papa, I cannot marry a fortune."

"You will have all a woman's heart can desire; an ancient title—lofty rank—the love of a noble heart—"

"A love I can never return—never! never!" exclaimed Alicia.

"Are you sure? The duke is handsome, full of manly grace; of a frank and noble nature, highly cultivated, devoted to you! Alicia, I dare not tell you how ardently I desire this match."

The girl sunk on her knees, bursting into a storm of sobs and tears.

"Oh, papa! have some mercy upon me! Do not condemn your child to certain misery!"

"Alicia! I had no idea of this! If you have such an aversion to the duke, I will not urge you."

She clasped his arms and thanked him in the midst of her weeping. He lifted her up and placed her on a seat beside himself.

"I own that I feel disappointed—bitterly disappointed. My heart was set upon this. But I cannot see you wretched. Perhaps on reflection you will decide differently."

"No, dear father; I can never accept the duke. I can never love him. Pray give him my answer. It can never be changed."

The baron groaned inwardly. He thought of the sad probability that his daughter's heart might be given to a man he wished she had never seen. But he knew that it was dangerous to recall his image by expressing his fears.

Again Alicia pleaded with tears that her answer might be conveyed to the duke without loss of time. She was miserable till she knew herself free from his pursuit.

Disappointed as he felt at this failure of his hopes, the baron had something consolatory in the background.

"I want to prepare you for another visitor, Alicia," he said. "He will be here this morning."

"It is settled, then, about the Duke of Montroy?" she asked, eagerly.

"I suppose so. I shall never force your inclinations," her father returned, a heavy cloud upon his brow.

"Then who is it you wish me to receive? Not another suitor?"

"No; an elderly gentleman; a native of Germany. He has lately been introduced to me by Sir Victor Wilder, who speaks very highly of him. He is anxious to make your acquaintance."

"But, dear papa—"

"I anticipate your scruples, my dear; but you may make an exception in this case. The gentleman knew your mother—before she was married—years before—when she was very young. She then helped him in some terrible emergency; it is to her he owes all the prosperity of his after life. I have promised that you will see him."

"Certainly, dear papa; I shall be charmed," cried the girl, her violet eyes sparkling. "Any friend of mamma's will always be welcome! What is his name?"

"Oscar Wallrade. He is not English, you know."

"I remember: a German, you said. I shall remain at home to see him."

The baron did not add the information he had received from Sir Victor; that the foreigner was a man of large fortune, and so eager to find the child of his former benefactress that not a doubt could exist as to his intention to make her his heiress.

It was this which had rendered the prudent father more yielding in the matter of the young duke's proposal.

His really unselfish desire was to see his daughter happy. With an independent fortune in her own right, it was of less consequence that she should make a splendid marriage; though he still felt deeply chagrined at her refusal of the ducal coronet.

Thus it was with agreeable expectation, blended with curiosity, that Alicia waited for her visitor. An engagement had called the baron out, and the elderly lady friend who usually accompanied his daughter out, or received company with her at home, was a prisoner in her own room with indisposition.

Alicia was alone.

She was dressed in a pale violet silk, with high corsage and long sleeves, with a linen cambric overdress, trimmed with Valenciennes lace. The rich material had a subdued effect, proper for a young girl's attire, in the plainness with which it was made. It fitted her slender form perfectly, and was not set off by a single ornament. A small bow covered the fastening at the throat. The sunny brown curls were fastened by a ribbon at the back of her head. The color called up by recent emotion yet lingered on her cheek. She was looking very lovely.

There was a tap at the door, and the servant entered with a card on a silver salver.

Alicia took it up and read:

"The Marchioness of Estonbury."

Her thoughts flew back to the evening of Lady Brandon's ball.

The man said her ladyship had not yet alighted from her carriage. Would Miss Maur see her ladyship?

Of course she would see her. She bade the servant show her up. Then she put aside her drawing materials.

Presently the announcement—"Lady Estonbury"—followed the opening of the door.

Alicia received her visitor with warm cordiality; the more so as she noticed a timid and embarrassed air, as if the marchioness were afraid of intruding.

She was dressed in a style rather elaborate and showy for the young lady's taste—a relic, perhaps, of what the marquis would have called her "early training;" but not too gorgeous for a young married woman. To them custom allowed more of display in the toilet than to an unmarried girl.

"I have something to show you, Miss Maur," she said, after the exchange of salutations and a little talk about the weather. "I am in need of your advice."

Helen took from her reticule the antique morocco case, opened it, and held it out for inspection.

Alicia started at the first sight of the miniature.

"Will you tell me whom it resembles?" asked the marchioness.

"It looks like—a friend—" was the hesitating reply.

"I should like to know if the same idea struck you as myself."

"The friend is—a gentleman; this may have been taken for a sister, or relative of his."

"Or—his mother. Look at the date." Alicia read it. Still she pondered. The color rose to her cheeks.

"Does it not resemble some one with whom I have seen you?" asked Helen.

The girl's blush deepened as she answered:

"Mr. Reginald Holmes? Yes; it is very like him. Did he give it you?"

"No, indeed; there is a strange mystery attached to the picture."

"A mystery?"

"I found it behind some books in our library, where it had lain neglected a long time; perhaps a score of years. I have not dared to ask any explanation, or even to show it to mamma, or to my husband. You are the only one who can help me to find out the secret—if there is one."

"I? how is that possible?"

"I am sure—the surer since you have recognized the likeness—that it is the picture of some lady related to Reginald. I have thought it might be his mother."

"His mother? I thought—"

"You know the story—do you not? It is generally known—how my husband came into the title?"

"I know that it came out—from Lady Estonbury's own statement—that Reginald was not the son of the late marquis—that he was not the rightful heir. It was sad enough—and a great change for him. But he gave up all—as soon as he found he had no right to the inheritance. He was too honorable to dispute Lord Estonbury's claim."

She spoke deprecatingly, as if anxious to shield her lover from blame; and Lady Estonbury hastened to assure her that no one knew Reginald's integrity better than herself, who had known him intimately from childhood.

"I have no one to consult but you, Miss Maur," she went on. "You may think it strange that I should come to you; but, as I know your interest in Reginald—"

She waited for encouragement, but Alicia said nothing. Her interest, however, was visible in her eyes.

Helen proceeded:

"I must confide in you. I know you will forgive me if I am wrong; but I feel as if I were bound to prevent a fraud that may injure—"

"A fraud?"

"Yes. Reginald is not the son of those people whose child he was said to be. That much I knew before."

Alicia changed color, though she did not speak.

"His parents were said to be Mr. and Mrs. Chisholm, the steward and my mother's maid. But he is not their son."

"How do you know?"

"I heard the woman—Chisholm—say so, a night or two before my marriage. She was talking with her lady—my mother, and asking her what had become of her boy. Her ladyship wanted her to think Reginald was her son; but she answered that she knew he was not; he had not the strawberry birth-mark."

"This is strange!" cried Alicia, breathlessly.

"I asked my mother about it; and she was very angry. It was plain that she was determined I should not know the secret. Then I told her—I swore to her—that I would never rest till I found out the mystery; and if it involved wrong to Reginald, that I would do him right."

Alicia threw her arms around the young marchioness, and kissed her fervently.

"I told the same thing to my husband. He laughed at me; but I could see he was disturbed. I have never given up this resolution."

"It is most generous of you, Lady Estonbury."

"Not generous; but just. I am sure Reginald has been wronged."

"Do you think he was the son of the marquis, after all?"

"I do not know. I am satisfied that he is not the son of the dowager—my mother."

"Ah!"

"She has always disliked him. A mother could not hate her own child, you know."

"I should think not."

"Then, she wanted him to marry me," the marchioness said, with a flushing cheek. "It was because he refused, that the matter of his not being the real marquis came out."

"Indeed! I knew nothing of that."

"He told mamma that he loved another lady, and would be true to her. He would never marry another."

Alicia blushed deeply, and a tender smile parted her beautiful lips.

"Yes—it was you whom he loved. I do not wonder at it."

"But—but—he never told me he loved me, till after he had lost the title," the girl murmured.

"Still, he loved you, and vowed to be faithful to you. He would give up fortune and rank—but he would not give you up."

"Dear Reginald!" Alicia breathed, with a gentle sigh.

"Had my mother been his, she could not have de-

prived him of these possessions. She could not have thought of wedding him to his sister!"

"Very true; she could not!"

"Then whose son was he? I thought he might have been stolen in infancy from noble parents; for none but noble parents could have such a son!"

Alicia's eyes sparkled; and again she threw her arm around Helen's neck.

"I have learned nothing more; at least, till I found this picture. It looks so like him I am sure it was taken for his mother."

Both ladies again examined the miniature.

"You see, by the date, it was painted at least twenty-five years ago. That was before Reginald was born."

"Indeed!"

"He is only twenty-three."

"Who, then, could be his father? Lord Estonbury?"

"I am sure he was not. Lord Estonbury was then married. And can you look in this beautiful face, Miss Maur, and believe, for a moment, that the original was not an honorable woman?"

"No; I cannot. She must have been pure and good."

"Then, look at the inscription on the back. 'Almeria to Egbert.' My father's name was not Egbert."

"It is strange, then, how the infant came into the marquis's family. Can you imagine?"

"I remember hearing that after the children had been changed—as you have heard—that Lord and Lady Estonbury went abroad, and stayed nearly two years. I was left with the Chisholms, to be brought up as their child."

"Yes—Reginald told me of that."

"Suppose that while Lord and Lady Estonbury were living abroad something had happened to the boy Lady Estonbury took with her! Or suppose she had grown tired of it! If she found a child more attractive, might she not have changed the children again?"

"How could she without Lord Estonbury's knowledge?"

"Very young children look very much alike."

"That is true."

"There are many English traveling and residing on the Continent. My lady—"

Helen often fell into the Chisholm fashion in speaking of the mother who had so recently claimed her.

"My lady might have seen a baby so beautiful that she longed to have it for her own; and might have somehow procured the exchange. Or it might have been stolen and brought to her."

"And imposed on his lordship?"

"Why not, as well as at first? The boy born of the Chisholm blood could not have been like the child of aristocratic parents."

"Your theory is possible, at least. But then would not her ladyship have given back Mrs. Chisholm's son?"

"There would have been risk in that. The maid would have been angry and might have betrayed the secret. So she was allowed to think the boy was her own, till she discovered to the contrary by noticing that it had not the birth-mark."

"Did she then make a disturbance?"

"Not immediately. Lady Estonbury persuaded her it had been removed, or outgrown, or had disappeared somehow. I gathered this from what I heard her say. She—Chisholm, I mean—was slow to think she had been deceived all these years."

"She is satisfied now that she was?"

"She appeared to be sure Reginald was *not* her child. How could he be? Children always inherit some traits of their parents; do they not?"

"I have always understood so."

"Well; we have established that fact, then. The next step is, to inquire who Reginald really is. That is what I have bound myself by a solemn oath to discover."

"Your ladyship is—"

"Call me Helen, please! Well—I have gotten the first link. This portrait—I feel sure it is his mother's."

"You found it in Lord Estonbury's library?"

"Yes—hidden there, perhaps for a score of years. And that is not all. See here!"

She took from a Russian leather pocket-book the folded yellow papers she had taken out of the secret drawer and unfolded them.

"Look; here is the marriage-certificate—the marriage between Almeria Stenhaus and Egbert Vane. The writing is clear, though faded. The date is 18—"

Alicia examined it carefully.

"This is wonderful!" she exclaimed.

"And here are two letters, both signed 'Almeria'—as well as I can make out the writing. See—it is the delicate writing of a lady—one of culture, too. But I cannot read the letters; they are in a foreign language."

"It is German!" cried Alicia, after looking at the manuscript.

"Can you read it?"

"No—I cannot; though I have seen the written characters, as well as the printed text."

At that moment there was a tap at the door. Helen threw her handkerchief over the picture and papers, to conceal them, and moved her seat to prevent any person gaining a sight of them.

Alicia went to the door and opened it. A servant handed a salver on which lay a card. She took it up and uttered an exclamation.

"Oscar Wallrade."

"You may bring him up," she said to the servant, who bowed and disappeared.

Helen folded up the papers, and returned them to her pocket-book, putting the picture in her reticule.

"He comes just in time!" cried Alicia. "Mr. Wallrade is a German; he will be able to translate the letter for us!"

CHAPTER XXX.

SATISFACTORY PROGRESS.

"AND who is Mr. Wallrade?" asked Helen.

"A friend of papa's. A friend of my mother's, too. She helped him in some way, when he was very young, and he is grateful for the benefit."

"Can we depend on him? You know it would not do to put the secret into a stranger's hands."

"I think we can trust him. At least we can ask him to translate the letters, telling him nothing. Then we can judge what further is to be done!"

The door was thrown open and Mr. Wallrade was announced.

Alicia rose and advanced, saying:

"I am Miss Maur," and gave him her hand.

Then she presented him to Lady Estonbury.

The visitor looked earnestly at his fair young hostess. His features worked with profound emotion, and once he passed his hand across his eyes. At last he said:

"You are your mother's own child, Miss Maur, and I think I should have recognized you as such, even if I had not known your name."

"Do you remember her so well?"

"Could I ever forget her? It was her fair hand that was extended to lift me out of the depths of misery and disgrace."

"Disgrace?"

"I was condemned for a crime I had not committed—in intent, at least; for an indiscreet and impatient act was against me—and would have ruined me but for her. Her influence procured my release; and not only that, but my establishment in a situation of trust and emolument in another land, where my fault was never known."

"You were in India many years, papa said."

"A lifetime for many persons. I find another generation on my return to England."

Some general conversation followed. Wallrade described his life in India. For the first time, he felt too much ashamed of his reckless association with gamblers, and made a firm resolution to avoid them in future.

"If I may be admitted to such society as this," he thought, "I will have no soil on my garments."

At length Alicia timidly asked if he would do them the favor to translate something written in the German language.

Lady Estonbury explained that she had found the letters in the drawer of an old cabinet, unoccupied since her father's death. She placed them in his hands.

He took them with a pleasant smile, and remarked carelessly how time-stained was the paper; and, if they were love-letters, what a lesson they afforded to ladies of the sad destiny of all records of the heart.

He read the first and longest aloud. It was, indeed, a picture of a loving woman's heart. She complained of her lover's absence, and passionately reproached him with having grown cold to her.

The language was simple, but earnest and forcible. She entreated the beloved of her soul to write at least, and tell her he was unchanged.

"Egbert!" repeated the reader, as he lighted on the name of the person addressed.

"How strange! how very strange!"

Then he glanced at the signature.

"Almeria!" He almost dropped the paper in utter surprise.

"Could it be Almeria Stenhaus?" he exclaimed.

"No—no—impossible!"

"The same! The same!" answered both the young ladies, rising, by a common impulse from their seats. "It is Stenhaus! That is the name on the certificate."

Helen quickly unfolded the yellow marriage-certificate, and exhibited it, pointing to the name.

Wallrade glanced at it, then looked upward with a rapt expression.

"Thank Heaven! Thank Heaven!" he exclaimed.

His listeners were too much awed to speak.

Lady Estonbury broke the silence first; for her heart was beating fast.

"Did you know her?" she asked.

"The portrait! let him see the portrait!" cried Alicia.

With trembling hands Helen drew it out, opened it, and held it before Wallrade.

He gave one look at the pictured face, staggered back a pace or two, and covered his face with his hands, while his frame shook with agitation.

"He is weeping!" whispered Alicia.

"He knew her!" returned Helen. She felt that she was indeed on the verge of discovery.

Wallrade recovered himself in a few moments. Wiping his eyes, he murmured an apology for his strange emotion.

"Nay, sir," said Alicia, "it is we who ought to apologize, for thus agitating you with painful memories."

"Not painful!" exclaimed the gentleman, again wiping his eyes. "No, dear lady; you have given me comfort. You have lifted a dark cloud, which I never hoped to see removed."

The young ladies looked at each other, neither venturing to speak.

Wallrade extended his hand for the portrait. He contemplated it long and earnestly.

"How like!" he murmured—"how very like! It is as I saw her last! And she was really married! I am glad of that! Egbert did her justice, after all!"

Helen was about to speak; but Alicia stayed her.

"He will explain directly. Has he seen the other letter?"

Helen produced it, and held it toward the visitor.

"This," she said, "was found with the other; in the same drawer."

Wallrade took it and read. Surprise was now depicted in his face.

"I never knew this!" he exclaimed.

Then he remembered that the ladies did not understand him, and that they had a right to a full explanation.

The language of the letter was incoherent and despairing. The writer, complaining still of neglect when she had a right to expect a husband's devotion, informed him that she was hourly expecting the birth of her child; and that she felt a certainty of not surviving its birth. She bade her husband an affectionate farewell. She implored him to care for the infant, and not leave it to be a burden on the labors of her poor mother.

The last words were a prayer that God would bless him; would reward him for the love he had shown one who was not high enough to be his equal; and would forgive him for wearying of her, if he ever had wearied of her, etc.

The postscript was in a cramped hand; that of an aged person. Almeria was very ill, it said; if her husband wished to see her living, he had not a moment to lose. The child was a boy, and likely to live. Whatever happened, Egbert would remember that he was his own. Almeria would not live to be a shame to him who had stooped to wed a poor girl; but the boy had noble blood in his veins, and was not to be cast off; under the penalty of retribution upon him who should wrong him.

Again the reader was agitated by deep emotion, and he sat long, with his eyes fixed upon the paper—perusing it again and again.

Then he recollected himself, and gave it back to the marchioness with thanks.

He rose, and paced the room slowly, sometimes uttering articulate sounds, as if talking to himself—in his native tongue.

Helen and Alicia sat clasping each other's hands; their eyes following him, while they preserved silence.

Nearly fifteen minutes thus passed. Then Wallrade resumed his seat.

"I trust you will pardon me," he said, addressing Alicia. "The page of life you have opened, by the sight of these relics, was a painful one; and this is the first gleam of light thrown on its gloom. Will you permit me to ask a few questions? I will answer you in turn."

Both ladies expressed their readiness to reply, in the confidence that what information they could give would be sacred with him.

He assured them it would be so.

"Where were these found?"

He pointed to the picture and letters that lay on the table.

Helen gave a brief account of the manner in which she had discovered them.

"And how came they in the possession of the late Lord Estonbury?"

She could not tell.

"Was he related in any way to the girl who was called Almeria Stenhaus? Or had he a relative of the name of Egbert Vane?"

Helen did not know. She had tried to learn from her mother, or her husband; but neither would satisfy her.

"There is some strange mystery in the affair."

Lady Estonbury was sure of it. It was the mystery she had been striving to penetrate; but it baffled her.

"What was the age of the late Marquis of Estonbury?"

She gave his age at the time of his death.

"And the date of his death?"

That was given.

Wallrade shook his head.

"He was too young," he murmured. "It could not have been!"

After a pause:

"You say he had no relative of that name; at least you never heard of any. What is the family name of his lordship?"

"The name is Vane Thorpe," replied Helen.

The German had resumed his walk to and fro in the room.

"Have you a copy of the British Peerage?" he asked.

"There is one in the hotel, I am sure!" replied Alicia.

She rung the bell and directed the servant who answered the summons to bring the book.

Her visitor opened it, looked over the list of the Estonbury marquise; then placed the open volume on the table, his finger on the line.

"Here it is," he said.

The two young women came to look, eager expectation sparkling in their eyes.

"Egbert, eldest nephew of the late Marquis of Estonbury—I am sure it is the same."

"That was not papa's name!" remarked Helen.

"No—but it was his elder brother's."

"He had no brother—when he succeeded to the title on his uncle's death. At least I have heard mamma say so, many times. He was the only nephew."

"Look for yourselves. 'Egbert Vane Thorpe, eldest nephew of the Marquis of Estonbury; born July 28th, 18—. LOST AT SEA—'"

"He was drowned!" exclaimed Alicia.

"Lost in the Esmeralda—on his return from India—September, 18—."

Wallrade's tone indicated suppressed emotion so deep that the young listeners gazed at him in astonishment.

"It is he! It was *my* Egbert Vane!" he cried, exultingly. "For a caprice, or to enjoy more perfect freedom, he dropped the latter part of the family name. He told me he was of a noble family; but he did not say he was heir presumptive to a marquise!"

"You knew him, then?" both ladies asked in a breath.

"Knew him! we were like brothers in India."

Many and many a hunt had we together! I loved him as if we had been of the same blood! But he never told me he was so high in rank at home!"

Helen had been examining the record. She now spoke:

"He was lost at sea in September, 18—. Then he could not have been the Egbert Vane who was married to Almeria Stenhaus."

"He was *not* lost at sea!" cried Wallrade. "The Esmeralda was lost. We both were on board of her; we were both saved."

An exclamation of astonishment from the fair listeners.

"I was enabled to save Egbert, as he was going down. I secured him to the raft. We were afloat four days. We were then picked up by a German vessel."

Both ladies gazed at him with breathless interest.

"We went to Germany. We lived there more than two years. Egbert was in feeble health; his constitution had suffered a shock from which he never recovered. It was there he saw and loved Almeria Stenhaus. I was afraid of the intimacy; for I doubted the steadiness of his principles. I never knew till now that he had married her."

"Why did he not let his friends know he was living?" asked Helen.

"That I cannot tell. He was always reserved about his family. When I reproached him for his love for a girl beneath him in birth and station, he answered angrily. We parted thus in misapprehension. When I returned to Dusseldorf he had ceased to live."

"How strange that his family should be suffered to mourn for him, when he had escaped the shipwreck!" said Alicia.

"I cannot account for his conduct, except that he feared his marriage would displease his high relations."

"It must have been so."

"He loved Miss Stenhaus, though it is evident that he strove at last to bring himself to the point of parting with her."

"The first letter shows that."

"Then his own failing health left him little energy. Still, I cannot understand why he failed to let his nearest relatives know of his existence."

"If he had lived," Helen remarked, in a low, musing tone, "he would have been the Marquis of Estonbury long before papa."

"At what time did the late Lord Estonbury come into the title?"

They referred again to the Peerage.

"That was soon after the news of the loss of the Esmeralda reached England," said Wallrade.

"And the younger brother succeeded, the elder being supposed drowned!" added Alicia.

"While he lived," said Helen, "my father had no right to the title or estates."

"If Egbert knew his brother had succeeded," observed Wallrade, "I can hardly wonder at his not caring to claim his rights. His health was rapidly declining. He had married—in an impulse of passionate love—a young girl whom he would not introduce to his aristocratic family."

"Was she of such low birth?" Alicia asked.

"Her family was respectable, though poor. The mother kept lodgers at Kaiserswerth. We lodged in the neighborhood. Almeria was beautiful and refined looking."

"You may know that from her picture," said Miss Maur, pointing to it.

"She had much native grace, but little education. Her brother was an artist; he traveled much and sent home the proceeds he received from the sale of his pictures. These helped them to live. After Egbert fell in love with the girl, he often sent presents of game and fruit to the mother. But they would not accept assistance in money. Almeria was proud, though so very poor. That is why I grieved so much at the probable result of her intimacy with Egbert. I feared lest he might deceive her, and degrade himself. I remonstrated with him, and urged his return to England. He resented my interference, and so we parted."

While Wallrade was speaking—still pacing the room—Lady Estonbury had returned the picture to her reticule, and put the folded papers in her pocket-book. She looked nervous and disturbed, till suddenly her face lighted up, as she turned to Alicia.

"I shall leave these in your charge," she said, giving her the bag and pocketbook.

"Why so?"

"I dare not trust myself."

"I do not understand you."

"Do you not see, Miss Maur," she whispered, "that if Reginald is the child of these parents, he is the rightful Marquis of Estonbury?"

"But we have no proof that he is their son."

"I want no proof. I feel it here." And she touched her breast. "This is the wrong that has been done him. My mother and my husband both know it. They knew it before my marriage."

"And what will you do, dear Lady Estonbury?"

"You must never call me so again. I am not the marchioness. I am simply Mrs. Howard, the wife of the man who wears the title unlawfully. What will I do? What did Reginald, when he thought he was in possession of the rights of another?"

"You must not act hastily. The links are wanting to prove this. Mr. Wallrade!"

He stopped in his walk and came near her.

"What has become of the child—the son of Egbert Vane?"

"I was thinking of that," he answered. "It must be my duty to find him. No doubt he was brought up by Mrs. Stenhaus, after the death of his parents."

Alicia continued: "Lady Estonbury and I both noticed a resemblance between the picture of the

ady—who married Egbert Vane—and a young gentleman—"

"Mr. Reginald Holmes," Helen added.

Wallrade repeated the name, evidently surprised.

"The young man who gave up the title and estates so honorably a year ago, and is now devoting himself to law! He is a noble fellow!"

"Do you know him?"

"I have that honor. I really esteem it such. But his birth! I understood that he was the son of the house-steward of the marquis."

"He is not; I have learned that much," Helen said. She went on to state all she had gathered from the conversation she had overheard.

Wallrade was inclined to adopt her views.

"But several links are wanting," he said. "These must be supplied, if possible."

"How?"

"The matter must be investigated. Do you think the dowager marchioness would give me any information?"

"I think—I am sure—she would not," was Helen's reply; and she looked deeply ashamed.

"Then I must go to Germany."

"You will?" asked Alicia, giving him a grateful look.

"It is not best to say anything to young Holmes, at present."

"No; not to any one."

"Be it so. To-morrow I will set out. Will you trust me with those proofs?"

"Certainly, if it is necessary."

"On second thoughts, it may not be; and you had better keep them, Miss Maur. If we can supply the missing links, it is here, in England, that our friend's rights must be established. I will write and report progress."

Alicia expressed her thanks.

It was agreed between the three, that nothing should be said of the matter, in the meantime.

Heavy steps were heard outside, and presently Baron Swinton entered. He greeted the German visitor with marked cordiality.

The young marchioness rose to take leave.

She pressed Alicia's hand, glancing at the picture and pocket-book on the table, and the girl promised to take special care of them. Then with an adieu to both gentlemen, Helen passed out.

The servant in attendance waited on her to the door, and her own footman helped her into the carriage, that bore the arms of the noble Marquis of Estonbury. She sighed as she took her seat, and the door was closed.

"It will end in our downfall," she murmured to herself. "And I shall have brought it all on my mother, my husband, and myself. Be it so. I must do as I have sworn to do. Justice before everything."

CHAPTER XXXI.

A LIFE SAVED.

An ancient-looking stone house, of spacious dimensions, with a row of poplars in front, and a goodly stretch of uncultivated ground in the rear, stood not far from the Rhine, in Kaiserswerth.

It had long been kept as a public-house, but was now let in suits of apartments to permanent lodgers.

In one of these, on the first floor, looking on the river, Kenneth Maur lay ill unto death.

His rooms were comfortably furnished. The floors were bare, but scoured to perfect cleanliness, and there were strips of carpet and matting in front of the bed and sofas. The bed and window-curtains were of muslin, delicately embroidered; the tables were of carved oak, and covered with the ornamental glass and china so much in vogue in Germany. Paintings of Flemish and German artists—copies of celebrated masters—hung on the walls; and flowers in profusion showed the prevalence of feminine taste.

It was Margaret Heyburn, now the happy wife of Herrick Maur, who supplied fresh flowers every day. She gathered them on the banks of the Rhine. She and Herrick were living in the same stone house, in an apartment on the floor above.

Herrick had regained his health, or nearly so, and looked back on his mad passion for Alicia as a foolish dream. He could not imagine how he could ever have loved any other woman than Margaret.

Kenneth was not pleased with the match. His heart had been set on Herrick's marriage with his cousin. When his own life—on which a ban rested—was over, his son was to return, as the recognized heir of the barony; and he wished the new line that should spring from him to be of pure blood—the noblest in the land.

But when he learned that Alicia had refused the proud destiny offered her, and Herrick had suffered in consequence, and had been nursed back to life by the Scottish girl, he almost forgave her plebeian birth, and made a virtue of necessity by consenting to receive her as his daughter.

The lovers had been married before they left Scotland. The wife was devotedly attached to her husband; and her presence in the foreign home made it sunny and pleasant to both father and son.

She at once took upon herself the charge of house-keeping, and with Hilda's assistance the table and mode of living were rendered so like home that Kenneth had less cause to regret his expatriation.

Margaret had kept up a regular correspondence with her foster-sister in London; and many were the presents of household stuff, and occasionally money, which Alicia had sent. She was thankful to hear of her cousin's happiness. She would bring her father round to approve of the match, and to welcome his kinsman and his wife at Stone Crag.

Matlin and his dog had made two journeys to Scotland since the fitting, and transacted business for the chief.

They were located near the stone house where Kenneth lodged, a little further from the river, in a portion of the manufactory, which was in after years converted into the "Training School for Protestant Deaconesses," where Florence Nightingale acquired her earliest lessons in nursing.

The little hamlet had been that day a scene of unusual excitement. A large party of wedding-guests had enjoyed a festival in a public garden bordering the Rhine. The guests came in boats from various points up and down the river, and there had been dancing and drinking, and a concert of musical performances by the band stationed in the summer-house elevated on a platform under the trees. Many of the revelers departed as twilight came on; but some lingered; though the sounds of festivity had died away.

Hilda prepared the evening repast, and brought his to "Sir Kenneth;" but he had little appetite. He liked the light wine of the country, and sipped the cup sweetened for him.

His strength was sadly shaken; and it had been many days since he had been able to sit up, or walk round "the garden," as they called the vacant ground in the rear.

On this evening he seemed disposed for conversation, and desired Herrick and Margaret to sit with him. He had many directions to give concerning matters at home in Scotland. The ruined castle he seemed to look on as his own, and he received the rents from several huts on its domain. These belonged to the Swinton estate, as well as the castle itself; but the baron had never interfered with his cousin's appropriation of them.

Only once had Kenneth shown remorse for the deed which had made him an exile for life. It was in cautioning his son to have nothing to do with the smugglers that infested the English coast. He had been compelled to join them, he said, to eke out his scanty revenues. But Herrick would be more fortunate. The baron ought to provide for him. He would live at Stone Crag with his wife, while the baron and his daughter resided in England. He would be made a magistrate, and must be strict in enforcing the laws, and aiding the government men. It had been unlucky for him that hard necessity drove his father into collision with the authorities, leading to the unhappy accident of the revenue-officer's death, etc.

The evening wore on in talk like this; and Hilda had prepared the night-draught and had fastened the doors, when the rush of feet outside upon the stone stairs proclaimed a late visitor.

Margaret and Hilda had already risen to retire. They opened the door, and Mat's dog dashed in, giving short, impatient barks, as if desirous of calling their attention to his master. Herrick descended the stairs.

There stood the seer, just outside the door, his hoary head bare in the moonlight; his right arm extended, and pointing in the direction of the garden which had been so lately the scene of revelry. He was again in "the vision."

"Hush!" whispered Margaret, who had followed her husband, and now laid her hand on his arm.

"The sullen guest!" muttered Matlin. "He lingers in the garden; he watches for his prey! Ha, he sees him! He springs upon him! He strangles him as he lies on the ground!"

The young wife instinctively threw both arms around Herrick, as if to shield him from some assailant.

"He drags him to the river!" shouted Mat, in a piercing voice. "He has plunged him in! The body sinks! It rises! It is gone again! The murderer steals away!"

As he uttered the last words, the seer staggered back, trembling, and would have fallen, had not Herrick supported him. His head fell back, and he lay insensible.

His "second sight" paroxysms often terminated that way.

"Help me, Margaret," said her husband, "we must take him in."

She took hold of the unconscious man, and together they carried him up the stairs.

"Now, some brandy!" as they laid him on a leather couch in the anteroom.

In a few minutes Matlin was able to sit up. Herrick questioned him as to what he had seen; but he remembered nothing. He never did remember his impressions while in the vision. But they knew him well enough to rely on his words.

He only recollected having seen a sullen guest, who stood apart from the revelers while at their banquet in the garden. The seer had been a looker-on. He had conceived a suspicion of this man; and when told that he had accused him of a murder, he started up, and declared he would go in search of the body.

"It must have floated down," he said, in excitement. "There is no time to call assistance. Snath will find him!"

The dog, alive for any service required, sprang after his master, who had already started.

"Stay; I will go with you!" called out Herrick.

"Nay, my husband! You are not strong—and the night wind is chilly," remonstrated Margaret, clinging to his arm.

"Stand off, wench! Know you not there may be a life at stake? Let me go!"

He broke away, calling to her to go back, and not suffer the old man to know aught.

She would have followed him, but he bade her go into the house.

Hilda appeared at the door, to ask the cause of the disturbance. Sir Kenneth, she said, was just going to sleep.

Margaret told her in a whisper, and bade her watch by the invalid till the men came back. She herself

would fetch her plaid and would walk under the poplars.

Matlin, Herrick and the dog hastened to the river-side. The current was not so rapid near the shore; and a body flung into the water half a mile further up might not have floated down in over an hour.

They had no hope of recovering the man alive, of course. But the discovery of a corpse would stimulate the authorities, and lead to justice on the murderer.

Once Herrick spied something in the stream, which he thought might be a human form. He took a small boat tied to the pier of a rude dock, and pulled out for it. But it was only a log with the bark worn off.

"Better trust to Snath," said the seer. "He will ferret it out by his smell before our eyes can discover aught."

They went up the river, carefully examining every marshy spot, and the boats lying idle in the stream at anchor.

Suddenly the dog bounded ahead.

Mat saw him, and motioned his companion to silence. They followed, but Snath was out of sight.

They had gone about half-way to the garden, a quarter of a mile from the landing opposite the stone mansion. A grove of low trees here grew in a spot of marshy ground, to the border of the Rhine, and a thick sedgy space was the resort of wild fowl in the season of their flight.

They heard the quick, sharp bark of the dog, and heard his plunge into the marshy water.

In a few moments they caught a glimpse of him, tugging at some dark object half submerged.

Mat gave a low whistle of encouragement, and quickened his pace. Herrick strode after him.

The dog had not relinquished his hold of the object he had seized. Both the men unhesitatingly entered the water choked with rushes, Mat sounding it as he went with his staff. He called to the dog again, and was answered with a low whine.

A long piece of timber lay in the marsh. Herrick raised this and let it fall toward the spot; it served as a support as they plunged through the sedgy grass, nearer to the spot they sought.

Snath by this time had the object afloat, and held it fast in his teeth, as he tried to swim toward them, still whining for assistance.

"It is a man's body!" cried Herrick.

"Push the timber further!" cried Mat. "Steady, Snath! Here, my fine fellow! Here!"

The water was up to his chest, and progress was difficult through the tall rushes. But they were both at arm's length presently.

In another moment Herrick had laid hold of a dark serge cloak. He pulled at it with a will.

Then the two lifted the body, each in an arm, while they steadied themselves by the timber.

They reached the shore, panting from the weight of the burden, dripping as it was. They laid it on the grass.

The drowned man was closely wrapped in the mantle. As this was opened, the face came into view. It was that of a middle-aged man, pale and cold; but it had not been sunken with the rest of the body, as was evident from the comparative dryness of the cloak that enveloped it.

"Let us make a litter," said Herrick, tearing down several of the boughs and tying them together with strips of bark.

A rude but strong one was presently constructed, and they laid the body upon it, bearing it homeward.

They consulted where to take their burden when they came in front of the stone mansion.

Margaret ran to meet them.

"You must not bring him here," she said, decidedly. "There will be a crowd and an inquest, and Sir Kenneth could not bear it."

"She says well," said Herrick. "Shall we take him to the inn?"

"No, to my lodging; to the manufactory," replied Matlin.

They carried him up in their arms.

Margaret helped to lay him on Matlin's couch, removed the wet cloak, and unfastened his dress.

"The man is alive!" she suddenly cried.

"Impossible!" exclaimed Herrick.

"His heart beats; and warmth is coming. Feel for yourself."

CHAPTER XXXII.

THE MURDERER TRACKED.

On the following morning, an inn on the road toward Holland, was a scene of a rather unusual bustle.

A pair of English travelers had arrived over night, and were arranging for their departure in different directions by carriage and on horseback.

There was a commotion in the courtyard, as the horses were few, and the demand much greater than the supply.

An elderly gentleman who had just finished his breakfast, was seated in the coffee-room. He did not contend with the other travelers. He could wait a couple of hours, he said; and if no horses were then at his service, he could walk to his destination. So he took up a newspaper, and seated himself by the window.

He was alone in the room, when the waiter ushered in a new arrival, placed a seat at a round table in the corner, and took the stranger's order for breakfast.

The elderly stranger glanced at the new-comer over his paper. He was evidently a Prussian; his dress showed it; and it was travel-stained, although of fine cloth. As he removed his cap, his hair was seen to be disordered, and his face was very pale. He glanced nervously round him every instant, and started violently when he caught the glance of the

other occupant of the room, shuffling uneasily in his seat.

"If I might judge from appearances," mentally observed the elderly man, "I should say you stranger had been perpetrating some crime, or had money or jewelry about him, of which he feared being robbed."

The waiter set out breakfast, which the man ate in haste, while he gave orders to have a horse saddled at once.

"We have no horses," replied the attendant.

"No horses!" the guest exclaimed. "But I must have one; a fresh one, too, to carry me to the next station in two hours."

"It is not possible, sir. Our horses are engaged. Here is another gentleman who is waiting because he cannot obtain a horse."

Thereupon the elderly traveler again looked up; and apparently saw something to fetter his attention; for he continued furtively to watch the man at his breakfast, while he did not permit him to perceive the scrutiny.

"But I must have a horse!" the man cried, impatiently. "Go and procure me one in the hamlet somewhere."

The servant shook his head.

"I will give any sum; I am in haste."

"It is not possible, sir. The horses are all taken. In two or three hours some of our own may be returned. Then you can be accommodated."

The man muttered a fierce oath. He swallowed his breakfast in haste, and thrust two or three rolls into his pocket. Then he rose to go.

The elderly gentleman rose too, and stood directly in his way to the door.

"Will you try the journey on foot?" he asked.

"I suppose I must," growled the new-comer, "for some miles further at least. What is the next post-station called?"

He turned to the waiter as he asked the question.

The English traveler made answer, speaking in the German language:

"That depends, sir, on the direction in which you are going. Whither are you bound?"

The stranger glanced at him angrily.

"I do not know how that concerns you," he replied.

"Not particularly; unless you are going my way. I am bound for the Rhine."

The sudden pallor of the man's face was startling. He averted his eyes quickly.

"I say—I am for the Rhine. And you—"

"I am not going that way," he muttered, in a sullen growl.

"Perhaps—to Holland?"

Again a look of terror, and avoidance of the penetrating eyes.

"Let me pass, if you please," the man said.

"One moment. I have a favor to ask."

"A favor?"

"Yes. It is that you will allow me to examine the brooch you wear in your shirt-front."

This time the alarm of the stranger was so manifest that even the attendant noticed it. He instinctively covered his bosom with his spread hand, recoiling a step as he did so. His knees trembled; his white lips were quivering. In a moment, however, he recovered his self-possession.

"You—you are impertinent, sir!" he exclaimed, angrily.

"Not at all. I recognize the crest on that brooch; the crest wrought in hair. I have never seen another like it. I wish to ascertain if it is the same."

Without reply, the Prussian endeavored to get past him to the door. But the sinewy arm of the stranger prevented him.

"Sir, I asked as a favor what I intend to claim as a right. Let me see that brooch."

"Sir, for whom or what do you take me?"

"I should not like to say. Your manner is strange, and excites suspicion. I wish to examine the ornament."

"I wish to pass out, sir."

"That you shall not do, till I am satisfied."

"Do you think I stole the trumpery thing?"

"It looks more like it that you are afraid to let it be seen!"

"Afraid!" with a contemptuous laugh.

"I recognize the crest, I tell you. I saw it in a brooch more than a score of years ago; I suspect that it is the same; it belonged to a dear friend."

"A score of years ago! And you expect to identify it now?"

"I can readily do so, if it is the same."

"How?"

"It has a secret spring; what that discloses will convince me."

Again the man's face blanched; and again he tried to pass, and found himself in the gripe of a force stronger than his own.

"Now, you shall not leave this room till I am obeyed. Give me the brooch! Or will you wait till I call assistance, and have you taken before the magistrate?"

The man's fears would have taught him the wisdom of yielding. He was in the act of loosening the ornament, intending no doubt to escape, leaving it in the hands of his captor, when there was a sudden interruption.

There had been a trampling of horses' feet, voices in conversation outside, and every indication of a new arrival. Now a number of persons entered the inn, and a crowd was gathering before the door.

The man saw this, and turning, darted toward the back door of the room, opening into the regions of the kitchen domain. But the elderly man, as before, prevented his flight.

He saw that it was an escaped criminal who showed so much fear of his fellow men.

Then the door leading into the hall was thrown

open, and several entered. Close behind them were two men in military dress.

They marched straight to the Prussian; and one laid his hand upon his shoulder.

"I arrest you," he said.

"You are mistaken," cried the prisoner, struggling to release himself.

"Is not your name Johann Berg?"

"No—no—it is not!" roared the man. "You are mistaken. Let me go!"

But that officer held him fast.

It was soon explained that a mysterious murder had been attempted or committed the night before at Kaiserswerth. It had been in a garden where an entertainment had been held in honor of a wedding. The party of revelers had remained till after sunset.

One among them had been particularly noticed; his looks and bearing were peculiar. His dress was that of a Prussian. He had been seen in the garden, after the departure of the other guests, with one man belonging to the hamlet, but about to set forth on a long journey; for he had a valuable packet of jewels to take to Vienna.

By some means it had been discovered that this man had been watched and attacked by the Prussian, had been strangled, robbed of his jewels, and thrown into the river. The body, floating down to a marshy spot, had been discovered by two Scotchmen, or rather by the dog belonging to one of them. They fished it out of the river, and carried it home.

The alarm was given; the magistrates had at once dispatched officers to track the murderer. They had spent the night in the search. There could be no doubt he would make for Hamburg or Amsterdam, where he could sell the jewels.

The officers had no difficulty in recognizing the Prussian; they had both seen him at the festival in the garden.

There could be no doubt of his guilt. The man stood like a statue, frozen with horror. His eyes glared like those of a sleep-walker; his features were rigid; his face white as death. All hope of escape had forsaken him.

He made no resistance when they searched his person. The packet of jewels was found in a secret pocket of his vest. It was taken out, while the officers proceeded to handcuff the prisoner.

"And the dead body—whose was it?" demanded the elderly traveler from England, his face working with unaccountable emotion.

"The man is not dead," said one of the new-comers. "He had floated down the river, and was found by a dog, and drawn out by two Scotchmen."

"Not dead!"

The words had a powerful effect on the Prussian. His features relaxed from their rigidity; his eyes gleamed with sudden joy.

"He is hurt pretty bad, but likely to live," said another—one of the officers.

"They do say," observed his companion, "that the old Scotchman is a wizard, and sees visions. He saw this man throttle Albrecht Stenhaus, and pitch him into the river just as he did it—though he was inside his own lodgings."

"I did not kill him," grumbled the prisoner, "by your own account."

"But you robbed him; and meant to kill him. You won't have the benefit of your failure."

"Albrecht Stenhaus, you said was the victim's name?" said the English traveler.

"It is."

"Then I must beg the favor, gentlemen, of being allowed to examine that brooch, worn by the prisoner."

"The brooch?"

"Yes—that in his shirt front. I knew Albrecht Stenhaus as a young man."

The prisoner made no resistance while the jewel was detached; it was then handed to the stranger. He looked at the crest embroidered in hair; smiled and nodded.

Then he pressed a spring at the back.

It flew open, disclosing a locket. This contained the exquisitely painted miniature of a young and handsome man. His fair complexion was bronzed; but the blue eyes and curling brown hair betrayed the Saxon. In enamel around the picture ran the words, "Egbert to Almeria."

The traveler gazed at it long and earnestly, while his breast heaved convulsively. Once he dashed his hand across his eyes.

"I was not mistaken," he said. "This jewel, which I knew at the first glance by the crest in hair, belonged to the sister of Albrecht Stenhaus. It contains the picture of my friend—the man who came from India with me, and was called Egbert Vane."

There was a murmur of curious sympathy.

"Will you allow me to restore this to Herr Stenhaus? He will know me. My name is Oscar Wallrade. I have just come from England on business that concerns the Stenhaus family."

"We will take it to Stenhaus," replied the officer, holding out his hand for the brooch.

Wallrade gave it up, taking down the officer's name and address. The party soon after set out on their return to Kaiserswerth.

Wallrade succeeded in hiring a horse from one of the force accompanying the officers, and rode with the rest.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

WALLRADE'S RESEARCHES.

THERE WAS a crowd assembled in and about the room at the inn where the examination of the prisoner was held. Stenhaus himself was able to be present. He gave the story with straightforward simplicity.

He had been charged with the conveying of a packet of jewelry to Vienna by two gentlemen in Dusseldorf. He had lingered several hours in the garden while the bridal festival was going on. He

had been desired by the Prussian to wait and be his traveling companion to the station for the night, where they meant to procure fast horses.

When dusk came on, they were alone. They were about to leave the garden when the Prussian had suddenly rushed upon him, flung him on the ground and throttled him till he lost consciousness. This he first recovered after he was taken out of the water.

Herrick Maur and Matlin testified to having searched for the body, found it among the rushes, and drawn it ashore. They had thought life extinct; but the shaking of its conveyance to the village no doubt had revived the nearly drowned man.

There was a profound sensation when Herrick related the conduct of Mat in "the vision," and his wild appeal for help in behalf of the murderer's victim. Even the prisoner was affected; and the superstitious looked at each other wonderingly. Who could dream of safety in committing crime, when it was thus miraculously revealed?

The Prussian was sent to prison to stand his trial for the robbery and assault.

As the people were dispersing, Wallrade grasped the hand of Albrecht Stenhaus.

"Do you know me, comrade?" he asked.

A moment of hesitation, and then Albrecht fully recognized him. He flung his arms round the neck of his old friend, according to the Continental habit—and asked many questions about the past.

"You must come to my mother," he said.

Before they went, the brooch was restored to its owner, and by him placed in Wallrade's keeping—as he said it would prove a link in the chain of evidence in a legal case in which he was interested.

Stenhaus took his friend first to his preservers. Wallrade thanked Matlin and Herrick the more earnestly, that he knew their association with the baron's daughter, and their consequent interest in his business. He thought it best to state at once his acquaintance with Lord Swinton and the fair Alicia.

Herrick seemed delighted to meet one who had so recently parted from his kinsfolk, and insisted on both the gentlemen going home to dine with him.

But Margaret met them at the outer door with the intelligence that Sir Kenneth was not so well; was restless and feverish, and could receive no guests. Hilda was in close attendance upon him.

Herrick presented the new-comer to his wife.

"You know, belike," he said, "how crazed I was for my cousin Alicia a time since?"

"I heard nothing of that," was the answer.

"Fie, Herrick!" cried Margaret, "think you our cousin betrays family secrets?"

"I'm not ashamed of it," bluntly said the young man.

"She is a lovely young lady," said the stranger.

"Ay; but I ha' gotten her better, say what you will!" ejaculated Herrick, passing his arm round Margaret's waist. The wife flushed with pleasure, and catching his hand, kissed it quickly and let it drop. Her grateful look bespoke her pride and affection.

Wallrade smiled; he was gratified to see the mutual devotion of the wedded pair, for he knew Alicia would be pleased. After some further conversation, he accompanied Stenhaus to his mother's house.

The aged dame was busy at work; for, though her circumstances had improved since the days when Wallrade had known her, her active habits had not changed. She recognized her visitor, and welcomed him cordially.

The shocking story of the attempt on her son's life was discussed, and shuddered over by the dame.

"He is all I have left," she murmured, "and he ought to be more careful. To risk his life in that garden at a wedding feast, and that when he had valuables about him! The boy was always rash!"

"The boy" replied that no one knew of his carrying jewels; and he had been at a loss to conjecture how the Prussian knew it, till he remembered having seen him in Dusseldorf the day he received the commission from the two merchants.

The old woman shook her head.

"He will never learn caution," she wailed.

"Others are incautious, too!" remarked Wallrade.

"This brooch, which Albrecht wore, was taken by the robber and placed in his own shirt-front. It was the sight of this that made me stop him; and if I had not, he would have been out of the inn, and on his way before the arrival of the officers sent to arrest him!"

"Thanks to an overruling Providence, who will not suffer the guilty to escape!"

"Now, madame, look at the picture," said Wallrade, "and tell me if you remember who it is?"

He opened the locket and displayed the miniature.

"Remember?" cried the dame. "Why, I have not lost my senses! That was Egbert Vane, my daughter's husband. Poor Almeria! she had but little joy of him!"

"He was my friend, you know. We came together."

"Ay, I know. I have often wished Almeria had wedded you!"

She had always fancied Oscar, as she called him, in love with her pretty daughter. She had insisted it was jealousy and disappointment that drove him away, when he found Egbert his successful rival.

"If you and the girl had been married I might have had her yet!"

"No one knows," said Oscar, with a sigh. "But pardon me if I ask a few questions. They are not idle ones."

The dame had covered her face with her apron.

"Your daughter left a child?"

She threw off her apron, wiping her eyes.

"Ay, indeed; as lovely a boy as mother need wish to see! What a comfort he would have been to her! Ach!"

"And he lived? What became of him?"

"Ach, mein Herr! it went to my heart to part with him! But what could I do? His own father claimed him!"

"His father—Egbert Vane?"

"Ay, I took him myself to his father," put in Albrecht. "It was a stormy night, and they thought Mr. Vane would not live till morning. I should have taken the boy again on his death."

"He owned Almeria for his lawful wife to us all. Else I would not have given him the child. But the law gave it to the father."

"I know it, dear Madame Stenhaus. But what became of the boy? Egbert was in his mortal illness."

Albrecht answered:

"He lived but a few weeks. But he had a grand relation; an English milord, who came all the way over here to see him."

"His name?"

"I do not know his name. I think he did not give out the name; He came in haste and on purpose to see Herr Vane. I am told he did everything for him that money could do."

"And the boy was given up to him?"

"Yes; he had lost his own; and he promised Egbert to take care of him and to give him a fortune."

"Have you ever heard of him since?"

"Never; he went back to England; at least, he did not stay here after Herr Vane's death."

"Had you no wish to trace him, and learn what had become of your sister's child?"

"It would have cost money, and I had it not to spend."

"I heard that the English milor went to Italy," remarked the dame.

"How should I have known where to look for him? After all, he had the best right. The father gave him the boy."

"Still it would have been satisfactory to know that the boy was dealt by according to promise."

"We were very poor then," said Madame Stenhaus. "We could not have given the child an education. If he lived, he would be better off with his English relations."

"Was the 'milor' a brother of Egbert's?"

"I never heard what relation. He lived very quietly, and saw no one but the rich man."

"Had he a wife?"

"I heard so," replied Albrecht, "but I never saw her. I heard the woman who took the boy say: 'This child will be a comfort to my lady in place of her own.'"

"She called her 'my lady,' then?"

"She did; and so did the people at the inn where she stayed. But she never went out; she was in poor health."

"You saw the gentleman; did he bear any resemblance to Egbert?"

"None; not the least."

"But he was kind to him?"

"He was tender of him and spent all his time in doing what he could for him. He would allow no other nurse to have the charge of him."

"Did he wear mourning at the funeral?"

"Bless you!" cried the dame; "the funeral was as private and quiet as if the man had died of the plague! There were no mourners."

"Where was Herr Vane buried?"

"In the little cemetery over the hill."

"I remember now. Beside Almeria."

"It was his wish. He always said he had never loved another woman."

"Now, Albrecht and Madame Stenhaus, let me tell you the business that brought me here. That noble gentleman whom you call 'milor'—as the Continentals call every man of wealth and standing—was, I am fully convinced, no other than the Marquis of Estonbury."

Both his auditors repeated the name—scarce pronounceable by foreign tongues.

"He was traveling on the Continent with his wife at that time. I have every reason to believe that he had lately lost, by death, the boy who passed as his son."

"Who passed as his son? Was he not?"

"I will explain all that hereafter. Egbert Vane was his brother. His real name was Egbert Vane Thorpe. He was the elder brother, and therefore the rightful Marquis of Estonbury."

The dame held up her hands; and her son looked astonished.

"Egbert was in wretched health. He failed so rapidly at the last that if he knew of the death of his uncle, the marquis, and his own accession to the title and estates, he did not care to claim them."

Madame Stenhaus shook her head.

"Such things have little worth when death is near."

"Almeria was a marchioness, then!" said Albrecht.

"Yes; for her husband was the marquis before her death. You can prove the marriage?"

"It was performed by a Protestant clergyman," returned Albrecht. "Two others besides myself were witnesses."

"Can these be found?"

"The witnesses can; the clergyman went to Vienna."

"You could find him, if necessary?"

"I think so."

"Have you a certificate? It is usual for the officiating priest to make out two."

Albrecht looked at his mother. She shook her head.

"I could never find my daughter's marriage-lines," she answered, sadly. "But Egbert—'milor'—owned

her as his wife; both while she lived, and after she was gone."

She covered her face with her apron again—for mournful recollections thronged upon her.

"I have a certificate, which Egbert must have given to his brother. It was found lately among his papers," said Wallrade.

"A certificate of the marriage?"

"Yes; it is plain enough for what purpose it was given. The boy, if he is living, is now Marquis of Estonbury."

The dame clasped her hands.

"My grandson?" she exclaimed.

"Even so; but he has been defrauded of his birth-right."

"Patience, mother," remonstrated Albrecht, endeavoring to check her ecstasies; "we know not even if the boy is living!"

"But I know," said Wallrade—"at least I am morally certain—that he is; and a nobler young man does not exist. You will have cause to be proud of him."

"He lives? Where?" exclaimed Stenhaus.

"In England; knowing naught as yet of his rights. But I am on the track to find out the truth. I will explain; though I cannot yet tell you all."

Lord Estonbury brought up the boy—Almeria's child and Egbert's—as his own son and heir; though he himself usurped the title and estates belonging of right to him as the elder brother's direct successor.

"The marquis died, and the boy came into the inheritance."

"He came into possession?"

"Then my lady—the marchioness—endeavored to compel the young man to contract a marriage with a girl she had adopted: the alleged child of her maid. The young man refused to wed one of menial birth; or to wed the girl at all; for he loved another. In her rage at the disappointment, Lady Estonbury disclosed the secret—that he was not her son. She declared him the son of her maid and her house-steward. The infants had been exchanged—she said—soon after their birth, and the girl was her own daughter."

"Then he is not Almeria's son."

Wallrade made a gesture imploring patience.

"The young man—Reginald—still refused to marry Lady Helen, though the loss of title and fortune was the alternative. As soon as he was convinced that he was not the son of the late marquis, he surrendered all: title, fortune, everything, to the heir-at-law. That gentleman came, took possession, and married the daughter of the house."

Both listeners showed their disappointment.

"Lady Helen, on the eve of her marriage, overheard a conversation between the maid and her mother, that convinced her Reginald was defrauded in some way. She made a vow to discover the secret, and do him right, if it lay in her power, even to the loss of fortune for herself."

"It was generous of her!" exclaimed Albrecht.

"She has kept that vow. Satisfied that Reginald was not the son of the Chisholms, she has obtained proof convincing enough, to any moral sense, of his real parentage, though it may be insufficient to establish his rights in a court of law, when those are keenly disputed. She found the marriage certificate I told you of, with the portrait of Almeria, inscribed to Egbert."

"I had it painted," interrupted Stenhaus, "in 18—"

"Yes, that is the date; I recognized the picture at once. There were two letters from her also."

Madame Stenhaus wept at every allusion to her daughter's acts; and her tears flowed abundantly at sight of copies of the letters.

"There is no doubt in my mind that Reginald is the child of your daughter. And we can establish the identity of Egbert Vane with the eldest nephew of the former marquis, whose title descended to Egbert's younger brother, he being supposed dead. He was reported 'lost at sea'—and no one in England ever knew that he had been saved. But here he must have been recognized. I am here to obtain the evidence of that identity. Only one link remains to be discovered; that is: the proof that Reginald is the boy he intrusted to the care of his uncle, and is his son."

"I could tell if I saw him!" said the dame.

"And I—if he is like his mother," said Albrecht.

"He is her living image."

"Then he is our own boy!"

"I have no doubt of it; but it must be proved beyond cavil. Titles and estates are not transferred by English courts without evidence that cannot be gainsaid. I must consult eminent counsel in London. They may find a way to compel the dowager marchioness to speak."

CHAPTER XXXIV.

HERRICK AND MARGARET IN LONDON.

A CARRIAGE drew up at the gate of the Estonbury mansion in London.

Alicia Maur was seated in the carriage with her chaperone. She gave her card to be presented by the footman; to be taken to Lady Estonbury. The knocker and bell were answered by a porter in the livery of the house. The card was taken in, and word came back that Lady Estonbury was not at home to visitors, on account of the illness of her mother.

Miss Maur left no message; for she thought it singular that she received none. The card had in fact been taken to the marquis in the library, who had sent the answer.

The illness of the dowager had overtaken her suddenly. It was an attack of paralysis, but not so violent as to place her life in danger. It had soon yielded to remedies; and she might have regained her usual health, but for the fever that set in after-

ward. This had run a course of several days, and had not yet abated. If not subdued speedily, the medical attendant had expressed uneasiness as to the result.

Lord Estonbury had a horror of sick-chambers, and had not visited his mother-in-law since her seizure. He did not like his wife to be much with the patient; he fancied all diseases infectious in some degree; but he did not interfere with Helen's doing what she pleased. Only, she must not approach him when she came from the invalid's room.

He had only that day, from the latest report of the physician, taken in the idea that there might be danger. This gave a new turn to his ideas.

He would not have grieved at the death of his mother-in-law, nor at that of his wife. The first would have been a relief to him. But if the fever increased, fever might induce delirium; and what revelations might be the result?

He changed his conduct, affecting a deep anxiety for the sufferer. He enjoined it on Helen to permit no servant or stranger to nurse her; or even to approach her if delirium supervened. He could control his wife in any event. And if there were danger of a death-bed confession, he had resolved to risk his own health by keeping guard in person.

It was necessary to relieve Helen; and, refusing to employ a nurse of tried skill, he had summoned Mrs. Chisholm to wait on her mistress.

The dowager, for months past, had not allowed her former maid to approach her presence, though she had complied, from time to time, with the demands of Mrs. Chisholm's husband for money. They were a habitual drain upon the liberality of the marquis; though not to any great extent; for they knew not the whole secret; and the aversion of their mistress toward them, would, he thought, prevent her placing herself further in their power. Even in the event of an awkward discovery, he knew how to silence them.

He gave orders that both ladies should be denied to all visitors. Thus Helen was deprived of the opportunity of seeing her friend, and learning what would have been most interesting to her.

Alicia drove home, doing a little shopping on the way, in Regent street, and arriving at her hotel about dusk.

The drawing-room of her suit was already lighted up; and the fact surprised her; for her father, in her absence, usually occupied his own "den," fitted up as a study. But she was still more astonished, as she entered, to find herself clasped in the arms of a lady in deep mourning. The lady wore a deep crape veil over her traveling bonnet; but Alicia knew the voice of Margaret at once.

The baron presented Herrick, who received a warm welcome. He, too, was attired in black. Her father explained that his kinsman, Kenneth Maur, was no more.

His death had been very peaceful, Margaret said; and he had suffered little. Matlin and Hilda were there to assist her in the care of the patient; and they remained for the present.

Herrick was a little awkward at first; for the remembrance of his wild behavior at Stone Crag, while under the sway of his savage passion for his cousin, was mortifying to him. But for his wife's entreaties, he would not have stopped in London. He had yielded to her anxious desire to embrace her foster-sister.

There were matters of business, too, to be arranged with the baron. As heir to the barony and all the estates appertaining, it was proper that some settled provision should be made, and some place of residence assigned to Herrick. He shrunk from the idea of making his home at the ruined castle by the sea, associated as it was with early painful recollections.

Nor should he do so—Lord Swinton declared positively. Was he not in the place of a son? No home but Stone Crag was a fitting abode for him; it was time he learned to do the honors of the mansion as its future proprietor.

"But it is your own residence," remonstrated young Maur.

"Alicia and I are not likely soon to return to Scotland. Are we, my girl?"

"And if we should, dear papa, we can be the guests of our cousins."

Margaret's heart thrilled. It was so delightful to her to be thus recognized and received as one of the family. She caught Alicia's hand, and kissed it.

"I was afraid my lord might not be pleased,"—she whispered—tears filling her eyes—"with a lassie of mean birth for his lordly young kinsman."

The intense worship of her soul was portrayed in her eyes, as she glanced toward her handsome young husband.

"How could you fear?" answered Alicia, in the same low tone. "You are the best of wives for him. And you know how dearly I love you, Margaret."

"He chose me, though I was unworthy."

"Most worthy!" cried Alicia, pressing her hand. "I will not let you disparage yourself. I cannot tell you how rejoiced I was when you wrote me that you were betrothed."

The baron managed to convey to the young couple his warm approval of their marriage; and his conviction that they would be happy, and that a jolly line of descendants would continue the succession. He added some good advice to Herrick; and invited him to meet him next day at his solicitor's to arrange such business as might come between them.

Alicia had made Margaret remove her bonnet and outer wraps, and she now rung the bell to order the evening meal.

A dainty one was presently ready in the dining-room, at which the health of the visitors was drank in good old wine, rivaling, the baron said, that in his cellar at Stone Crag.

By the time they adjourned to the drawing-room, Margaret had given some account of events during the last few weeks of their stay in Kaiserswerth.

She described the occurrence of the attempted murder, discovered through the mysterious "second sight" of the Scottish seer, and Herrick's bravery in going to render assistance.

It was a joy to her to speak of his good deeds; for never did a wife more idolize her husband. Happiness had made Herrick modest; for he disclaimed her praise, and declared the credit was owing to the dog.

Alicia and the baron both started when they heard the name of Wallrade; and the baron wondered what business had taken that eccentric individual to Germany. Belike, to look up titles to lands upon the Rhine; in which he wished him luck; and he mentally added, for his sweet daughter's sake. He was now certain that Wallrade meant to leave his ample fortune to Alicia.

The Herr Wallrade, Margaret said, had fallen in with some old friends; the man whose life Herrick had preserved—Herr Stenhaus—and his mother.

"Stenhaus, did you say?" repeated Alicia, with quivering lips. She had never dared tell her father of the business on which Wallrade had gone abroad.

"Yes; Albrecht Stenhaus. His mother was like one distraught when she first learned the peril he had escaped. She could have worshiped the ground on which my Herrick stood. How well I remember her white face when she came in and threw herself on her knees by the couch on which lay the poor man—her son."

"Had she any—other—children?" asked Miss Maur.

"None; he was her only one; and he supported her by his labor and commercial trips. He was about starting on one when the robber entrapped him."

"Herr Wallrade is coming back to England," remarked Herrick, carelessly.

"Coming back?" Alicia repeated. He had written to her that he was on the trace; and it was to carry that news that she had called upon Lady Estonbury. Was he coming back because he had succeeded, or had he given up the enterprise?

Her heart beat so that she was afraid its throbbing would call attention to the emotion she could not quite conceal. It was evident that Wallrade had not confided his undertaking to her cousins.

The visitors did not remain late. They were going on to Scotland as soon as possible, and had no desire to linger in the metropolis where they were utter strangers.

The baron, in shaking his kinsman's hand at parting, reminded him that he must not be late in his attendance at his solicitor's the next day.

When they had departed, Lord Swinton threw himself into an easy-chair before the fire, and commenced making calculations with a pencil on a piece of paper. He did not notice the abstraction of his daughter.

How she longed to throw herself on her father's breast, confess all her hopes and fears, and entreat him to send for Reginald! The happiness of her whole life, she felt, hung upon the tidings Wallrade would bring from Germany.

CHAPTER XXXV.

MRS. CHISHOLM PACIFIED.

It was about eleven at night when young Lady Estonbury arose from the luxurious lounge—furnished with cushions like a bed—in the large ante-chamber adjoining the rich chamber of the dowager.

For hours she had slept the deep sleep of exhaustion. The room was dimly lighted by a small silver lamp that stood on a marble table at one end. The flowing silken draperies of the windows were softly stirred by the breeze, one of them being opened a little to admit the fresh air.

Helen was very white, but arose refreshed by her slumbers. At first she did not remember where she was; and she passed her hand over her forehead with a piteous expression of bewilderment. Then she recovered her full consciousness, and wondered how long she had slept.

There was a quaint old Dutch clock on the mantelpiece; and, looking at it, she started to see how late it was.

She passed noiselessly through the dressing-room adjoining, and opened the door of the sick-room. A curtain of heavy silk, usually looped up, hung over the entrance. As Helen lifted her hand to throw this aside she was stopped by the sound of voices.

As perfect quiet had been enjoined by the physician, her first impulse was to silence the speaker; but, as she caught the first words, she stood perfectly still. Then she softly raised the curtain on one side, so as to see within her mother's chamber.

The stately bed, with its white curtains drawn back to admit a free current of air, stood with the head against the opposite wall. The dowager lay propped up by the lace-fringed and snowy pillows. One of her arms was thrown over the blue silken coverlet, and moved in the restlessness of febrile excitement. The other supported her head. Her cheeks wore a dangerous flush.

Chisholm, the maid, was kneeling beside the bed, her face partly concealed, and sobbing violently.

"Oh, my lady, my lady!" she moaned. "I did not think but that you would have pity for me now!"

"You trouble me, Chisholm!" returned her mistress, wearily. "My head aches so that sometimes I think my reason will desert me!"

"And so it may, my lady; and the words unspoken that may give rest to my poor heart! Oh! as you value peace for yourself, tell me, and give me peace!"

"I have already told you."

"But you know, and I know, my lady, that it can not be so."

"Who dares question my word?"

"I mean no offense! You know that! I have held my tongue all these years! I have kept silence, to obey you, when my heart has been well-nigh broken! Oh, but it's sore punishment on me for having been too submissive and too loving to my mistress!"

"Woman, how dare you reproach me?" cried Lady Estonbury, growing more excited, and pushing against the woman's head as it leaned on the bed.

"My lady, I have grown desperate. But I will be your slave, if you will but tell me the truth."

"You had it at first; but you refused to believe me!"

"Oh, my lady, not an angel from heaven could have made me believe the boy my own son. Tell me, where is the one you took from me?"

"You will force me to call for assistance. You take advantage of my helplessness!" groaned the invalid.

"I have been struggling and striving not to speak; but I can hold speech no longer. Only one word, my lady, to say where I may find him!"

"Do you accuse me of having killed, or sent into concealment, your son?" demanded the lady, fiercely.

"Alack! I know not what!" exclaimed the woman, wringing her hands. "I only know that you took away my blooming, beautiful boy, and I have never seen him since! And now I pray you, on my knees, to give him back to me!"

"Why should you think I parted with him?" asked her mistress, querulously.

"Because I know the one you brought home was not mine! He has grown more strange to me as he grew up! He disowns me, and my heart disowns him."

"Why do you urge the matter now, when you have kept silence so long?"

"My husband would not let me speak. He said: 'The boy will take care of us as his parents.' But he refused to acknowledge us. Then I was seized with a longing to embrace my own. A mother cannot forget her child, my lady. Did I not keep yours for you, and cherish her, and restore her fair and blooming to your arms? My lady, you are wicked to wrong me so!"

"I have not wronged you."

"Am I not robbed of my child?"

"Why do you suppose I would give him up?"

"I cannot tell. Belike you saw the signs of better blood in the one you put in my son's place!"

The lady half-raised herself in-bed.

"Silence!" she exclaimed. "Do you think me a fool, to place myself wholly in your power?"

"Oh, my lady!" went on the desperate woman, "death may be very near! Your reason may not be spared. A few hours may make it too late to do me justice. As you would pass to judgment without a mortal sin on your soul—I beseech you—"

The invalid sprung up and threw off the coverlet from her shoulder.

"Death near?" she faltered, repeating the words of her attendant. "Who says so? Am I not growing better every day? Death! Does any one think I am going to die?"

In her excitement she slipped from the bed, and stood upon her feet. Her white dressing-gown fell to the floor; her arms were outstretched, grasping the air; her face was blanched with the horror of fear that had come upon her; her white lips quivered convulsively. Her form swayed to and fro.

Helen flew to her assistance, and caught her in her arms, as she would have fallen. She lifted her in her arms and placed her on the bed; then seized the bell-rope, and rung a violent peal.

Chisholm had risen and stood petrified under the young lady's indignant looks.

"Begone!" cried Helen. "You see she has fainted; would you kill her outright?"

There was a rush of feet outside, and several of the servants presented themselves in answer to the summons.

"Call his lordship, and send for the doctor," cried the marchioness, preserving her presence of mind.

She stood with her arm around her mother, as if to shield her. The attendants hurried along the corridor to the apartments of the marquis. But he had been aroused by the bell, and was coming, already, in his dressing-gown. He dispersed the affrighted throng, and strode on to the door of the dowager's room.

She was still insensible, and Helen, pale as a corpse herself, was chafing her hands and bathing her forehead with cold water.

Chisholm still stood in the middle of the room, like a statue of despair.

"What is the meaning of this?" demanded his lordship, as he went up to the bed.

Helen explained that she had lain down to sleep for a few hours, leaving the maid with her mother. When she came back, the two were in the midst of a conversation which violently agitated the invalid. She had rushed in, in time to save her from falling to the floor, in the swoon that followed her excitement.

"Can you stay with your mother a few moments?" asked his lordship. "Or shall I send one of the housemaids to help you?"

"Oh, yes! do send some one!" she answered, trembling from head to foot. "I have never seen her like this before! If she should never come out of the fainting-fit!"

"She will come out. See, her pulse is stronger—she will revive soon. Stay with her ten minutes, till I return. Now, woman, come you with me," he said to Chisholm.

By the time they had reached the library the poor woman had recovered her self-possession, and braced

herself up for a determined assertion of her maternal rights.

The enforced silence she had kept so long, under her husband's constraint, and the influence of other motives, now gave additional strength to her resolve. If her lady should die with the secret unspoken!

She entered at once into a voluntary confession. She wished not to distress her lady; but if she were to die, or lose her reason, what clue could she obtain to the discovery of her child?

"And you have done your best to hasten that event you pretend to dread!" said the marquis, sternly. "Do you suppose your mistress will not have her days—her hours, perhaps—shortened by the shock you have made her suffer?"

"Heaven forbid!" exclaimed the woman, clasping her hands, and looking upward.

"The knowledge of her imminent danger has been carefully kept from her. She always had a terror of death. What you said may terminate her life within a few hours."

Chisholm sunk on her knees, and, amid sobs and groans, besought pardon.

"Stand up, and listen to me," ordered the marquis. "If you had come to me, all this might have been saved. I know all you wish to know."

"You? your lordship?" gasped the woman.

"You were right in what you said, as far as regards the parentage of—the young man to whom you alluded. He is not the son you gave your lady, in exchange for her infant daughter."

"I knew it! I knew it!"

"Your lady and the late Lord Estonbury were abroad much more than a year, you remember."

"I do, your lordship."

"Your son—then a very young infant—died at Antwerp."

"Died!"

"Died after a few hours' illness. It was croup, I think she told me."

"And she never told me!" sobbed the mother.

"She had her reasons. The infant boy taken in the place of the lost one was adopted by Lord Estonbury, somewhere in Germany."

"Oh, my lord, it cannot be! The late marquis doated on little Reginald. He never could have loved so much a stranger to his blood!"

"Who said he was so?"

"Did not your lordship?"

"No—I did not. Your lady had imposed an heir upon him; he forced one on her. She had good reason to hate the boy!"

"Then he was—her husband's son—but not her own?"

The marquis nodded.

"My late lord never loved my lady. But it was cruel of him to force her to own a base-born child, even if he had the blood of an Estonbury in his veins."

"Are you satisfied?"

"Oh, my lord, forgive me; but—"

"Would you have proof that your son died? I can give it you! I will do so; and then the matter must rest forever."

He went to an Indian cabinet, which he unlocked. From a drawer, that opened by a concealed spring, he took out a folded paper, yellow with age. Unfolding it, he held it before the woman.

It was the certificate of the burial of "Reginald—infant son of the Marquis of Estonbury;" and was dated Antwerp, etc., etc.

Mrs. Chisholm read it slowly, then staggered back, and clasped both her hands across her forehead.

"I hope you are satisfied, now," said his lordship.

"Heaven forgive me!" she wailed, and her head sunk on her bosom. The marquis went on:

"The late Lord Estonbury—my cousin—had an insuperable aversion to me, and was determined to prevent my succeeding to his title. When they lost your boy it was necessary to substitute another heir in his place; and his lordship naturally preferred his own offspring, even if the bar sinister interposed between him and any right to inheritance."

He spoke with a sneer, watching the woman's face keenly.

"You can understand, now, your lady's reluctance to speak of the matter. It was sore humiliation for her."

"Oh, pardon me, my lord!" cried the dame. "If I had only known it!"

"Well, you know now, that is sufficient. You may remain in attendance upon your lady, if you will make me a solemn promise never to speak to her again on the subject."

"Bless you!—bless your lordship!"

"And if in her delirium she should say anything, report it to me, and say naught to any one else. Will you promise this?"

"I will, my lord!"

"If I hear of your gossiping concerning family matters, I shall know how to punish you," he added, sternly.

"My lord, I have borne this grief so many years without speaking—"

"That is security for your silence. Well, I will trust you. You must answer for your husband."

"Indeed I will, my lord."

"You had best not go near Lady Estonbury to-night. I will sit with her. You may go to your room."

The woman made a profound obeisance, and renewed her expressions of gratitude. She saw in his lordship's forgiveness and his continued trust in her a pledge that both she and her husband might depend on his bounty, as before. That set her mind at rest.

Many a dispute had she had with the ex-steward, who had hitherto restrained her from inquiries concerning her child. He had always insisted that she was mistaken, and that Reginald was their own.

When she repelled that conviction, and avowed her belief that her child had been put away and was living somewhere, his authority was overbearing, and sufficient to compel her obedience.

Now she could be silent with an unmurmuring spirit.

After she had left the library, his lordship continued his walk to and fro, arranging his plans in the event of the death of his mother-in-law.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

HELEN TRUSTED.

UNDER Helen's gentle ministrations, consciousness slowly returned to the dowager. Her eyes opened, the color came back to her cheek; her breath came pantingly and irregularly, as of one in the grasp of fever, and her eyes were glassy and wild. Her daughter soothed her, laying her cold hand on the burning forehead, and moistening the parched lips with the refreshing draught prepared.

Presently the patient partially lifted her head, to see if any one else was in the room. Helen stooped and kissed her, while she bade her not tax her strength.

"Is no one here but you?" asked the invalid, faintly.

"No one, dear mamma. But the doctor will come; they sent for him when you fainted."

The pale hand was stretched out, and grasped the daughter's arm, drawing her closer.

"Helen, tell me the truth! Am I going to die?"

"Oh, dearest mamma, how can you think of such a thing! We hope and expect that you will soon be well."

"But Chisholm said so."

"She was frantic. My lord has sent her away."

"I want to know the truth, Helen. Do not deceive me."

"You have been made worse by the shock. But the doctor will give a composing draught."

"You do not answer me. Am I thought to be in danger?"

"I have never heard any one say so, indeed, mamma. Pray be calm; do not talk; I am sure it is not good for you!"

Her tears were flowing fast; she threw her arm over the patient, clasping her fevered hand, and laid her face close to hers on the pillow. But she could not stop her from speaking.

"Helen," she faltered, in a low, earnest tone, "I can trust no one but you. If I am to die there is something to be done. I cannot leave this world with that secret weighing on me. It would sink me to perdition."

"Oh, mamma, mamma! Speak and ease your mind at once! Do not brood over such thoughts."

"Tell me, could I hope for salvation if I suffered a wrong and fraud to go on?"

"Heaven forbid that any one should dare set limits to the mercy of our heavenly Father; but, oh, mamma, do not let wrong and fraud soil your soul, in life or death!"

"The telling of the secret would plunge you into poverty, my child."

"Mother, mother, think not of me! The Right before all!"

"You are a saint in heart, Helen! I do believe you would lay down your rank and title without a murmur."

"If I possessed them by fraud, they would be worse than worthless!"

"Ay, the burning crown! You have read of it; but I have felt it! It scorches my brain; it will drain my life!"

"Pluck it off! oh, pluck it off!"

Helen sunk on her knees by the bed, on the very spot where Chisholm had knelt, and clasped her arms round her mother's neck in mute supplication.

There was silence for a few minutes. Then her ladyship motioned for the cooling drink which Helen held to her lips.

"Helen," she said, "will you promise me, if I put myself wholly in your power, to say nothing—to reveal nothing while I live?"

"Oh, mamma, should we make conditions in doing an act of justice? I trust you will live many years."

"In that case, I will take my own way of disclosing the secret. You must promise what I ask, Helen. I feel that this fever may overpower my reason; I feel that I may die without being able to speak. Don't weep, child, but promise me! I will not trust you unless you do! Will you? Say quickly! My head will burst if I have to bear any more!"

"Mother, I promise."

"You will never betray me till I give you leave, or till—I am no more?"

"I will not! You may trust me!"

The sufferer plucked at a ribbon round her neck. It had a key attached to one end.

"Take this," she said, "and open the walnut cabinet in my dressing-room. The center drawer; the key unlocks it. Stay—I forget—my mind wanders—there is a drawer within, or—a false bottom; press the spring at the back. You will find the papers there."

Her intermittent tones showed that the fever was doing its work with her brain.

Helen hastened to do her bidding. She locked the dressing-room door before she opened the cabinet. The drawer came out; it was filled with jewels of no great value; the Estonbury diamonds being kept under his lordship's charge.

The pressed spring disclosed the space between the two wooden bottoms. The young marchioness secured the papers, which were thick and heavy; then she closed the drawer and the cabinet, unlocked the door, and hurried back to her mother.

"I will not even look at these," she said, "till you give me leave, mamma."

But her ladyship had fallen into a doze, and did not reply. Helen again fastened the key to the ribbon round her neck, put the papers in her own bosom, and resumed her watch.

In ten minutes there was a bustle in the hall below, and steps were heard ascending the stairs.

The marquis entered, preceding the physician, who had been summoned. He went to the bed, and examined the unconscious patient.

His face suddenly darkened.

"There has been mischief done here," he said, "since my last visit."

His lordship explained that the indiscretion of the waiting-maid had caused her lady a great shock.

"And thrown her into a condition I do not like!" the physician added. "Feel her head. My lord, I must ask you to send in the morning for Sir James Harcourt."

This was the name of an eminent London physician.

The doctor went on to order ice applied to the patient's head, and other remedies to subdue the fever. His anxiety could not be concealed.

He admitted to Lord Estonbury, in the dressing-room, that the shock might cost the patient's life. Enjoining perfect quiet, he took leave, promising to return early in the morning, before the time appointed for the consultation.

Helen still sat motionless by the bed. It was already well on toward morning.

"Poor girl!" said her husband, compassionately. "You had better retire."

"No, my lord; I will stay here. I am not fatigued."

"Your mother will not come out of that stupor till the fever abates. You can stay till then, if you will call me as soon as she wakes."

"Very well, my lord."

She was once more left alone with the sick.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

THE WIFE'S DEFIANCE.

DAYS passed on, and the condition of the dowager marchioness did not improve. The consultation

availed little. The triumph of medical skill over disease has its limits, and these had been reached. But little hope remained of her restoration to health.

The intervals of reason became fewer and shorter; and while the paroxysm of fever continued, the patient muttered in low delirium or struggled with terrifying spasms. When the violence of the fever abated, she lay usually in a stupor.

Never was bond-slave more faithful to a master than Dame Chisholm to his lordship. She knew her dependence on his bounty; and hoped for reinstatement in one of his households at some future time. Every word that fell from the unconscious sufferer was reported to the marquis.

She often dropped strange expressions, which he had some difficulty in explaining to the apprehension of his informant.

Sometimes the sufferer fancied herself in Germany; talked of his lordship's brother, and of little Reginald as his son and heir.

"It was their plan, at first," remarked Lord Estonbury, "to pass the boy as a nephew. But you see, yourself, it could not be. The elder son, Egbert Vane Thorpe, perished at sea more than a year before Reginald was born."

"I have heard so, my lord."

More and more, every day of this; till his lordship, with anxieties continually on the strain—most earnestly wished that the scene would close. Such wanderings were rarely heard in his presence; but Helen, who seldom left her mother's side was a witness to them.

Late one afternoon Chisholm came into the library, where his lordship was reclining in a leathern-cushioned chair. She closed the door, and approached with her usual stealthy tread.

"Well?" inquired the marquis; who saw that she had something to communicate.

"Her ladyship has been quiet this afternoon," the woman said. "The fever is not so high, and she appeared sensible. I heard her whisper to young Lady Estonbury what I am sure your lordship ought to know."

"What?" asked the marquis, affecting an indifference he was far from feeling.

"I heard my lady say: 'Helen, remember your promise,' and she answered, 'I do remember it, mamma.' And my lady said then: 'Not a word while I live. If it pleases God to restore me, I will do it in my own way.' And then my young lady leaned her head down, sobbing ready to break her heart. But she said 'yes' to all her mother whispered in her ear."

"What do you make out from this?"

"There is some understanding between them. What it is, I cannot make out. But my young lady has promised to do something in case of her mother's death."

"She would promise anything to soothe the patient."

"Ah, my lord, you do not know young Lady Estonbury. She would never promise what she did not mean to fulfill. And I saw it in her face, my lord, that she had something weighty on her mind."

"It was your fancy, Chisholm," said his lordship, smiling.

"Not at all; craving your lordship's pardon. My young lady is as firm as a rock, and as deep as a well."

"Did you get an idea of the matter between them? Was there a word dropped that could lead you to a conclusion?"

"I heard my lady speak once the name of 'Reginald,' and I heard young Lady Estonbury whisper, 'Hush, mamma,' and try to soothe her, as if afraid

she would excite herself too much. But it may have been to prevent my hearing anything."

The marquis rose, and paced the room uneasily. Chisholm went on to report her reasons for thinking Helen should be watched.

"You are a good, faithful soul, Chisholm," remarked his lordship, giving her a sovereign; "and I shall remember your devotion to my interests. But you perplex yourself without cause. There can be nothing between your lady and my wife. If Helen knew anything, or had promised to do anything, she would come to me for aid."

The woman meekly crossed her hands, and bowed submissively.

"You are right to report everything to me," his lordship continued, "as I alone can judge what is of importance. This is nothing. You may go now; and I will visit your lady in the course of an hour."

Chisholm courtesied and left the room.

A change then came over his lordship. The most profound disturbance was evident in his movements and his countenance.

"Helen arrayed against me!" he muttered under his breath. "It is just like her to undertake setting matters right under the plea of justice. I should not wonder if the doting fool had made her promise to do it to save her soul from perdition! 'Not a word while I live.' Ay, my lady; and when the breath is out of your body, I will take care of my wife!"

He resumed his walk for some minutes.

"Pshaw!" he exclaimed. "What could be done, even if the mother did cram the daughter with a story, to be repeated after her death? What would such testimony avail? The word of a crazed woman in the last stage of typhoid fever! The courts would laugh at it!"

He went into the dining-room, helped himself to a glass of wine, and rung to order supper.

"Tell Lady Estonbury, my wife, that I would like to have her company at supper," he said, to the footman.

The man went up, and returned with the answer that his lady begged his lordship to excuse her. Her mother was not so well, and she herself could eat nothing.

"By Jove she avoids me!" muttered his lordship. "I will see to this."

He partook of the dainty meal in silence and alone.

Then he rose and went up the stairs; knocking at the door of the dowager's dressing-room.

Helen herself came to the door. She smiled feebly when she saw her husband, and went back to her seat by her mother's bed.

Lord Estonbury inquired how she was, how long since the doctor's last visit, and if he was coming again that evening. Then he asked where Chisholm was.

"It is not right, Helen," he said, "that you should wear out your health and strength. Chisholm is an excellent nurse. She is faithful, too. Call her in, and let her stay with your mother, and come you out on the terrace for a walk. You are suffering from this confinement."

Helen begged to be permitted to remain; but his lordship was peremptory. He called Mrs. Chisholm, who was in the sitting-room belonging to the suit. Then he gave Helen his arm and led her downstairs.

The cool night air on the lawn refreshed her. They walked there about half an hour.

Then Helen begged to go in. Her husband took her into the library, and brought her a glass of wine, saying it would do her good. She sipped it in obedience to him.

When she rose to go up-stairs, he bade her sit still. The lamps were lit, and burning brightly. He rose and went to the door, turning the key.

"Do not be startled," he said, observing his wife closely. "But I want a few minutes' conversation with you."

"With me?"

"With you. Why do you look so frightened?"

"I am not frightened."

"You have avoided me of late, Helen; and now, when I speak to you, you turn pale, as if I had a knife at your throat."

She tried to assure him she was calm and not at all terrified; but she trembled violently, and could hardly articulate a word.

His eyes were fixed on her face.

"Have you heard anything, Helen, to make you shrink from me?"

"Oh, no! but—my mother is so ill! She needs me all the time! Let me go to her!" she sobbed, almost incoherently.

"Your mother is in good hands; better than yours, Helen, if you encourage her to talk of exciting matters."

"I—encourage her?"

"Helen you are always truthful. Can you deny that your mother, since she has been ill, has made disclosures to you, touching family secrets?"

The marquis thought, by plunging at once into the heart of the matter, to take his wife by surprise, giving her no time for prevarication.

Oh, how thankful was Helen that she could utter the denial with perfect truth!

"Sir—my lord—I assure you, my mother has made no disclosures to me! She has revealed no 'family secrets.'"

"Are you sure? Has she told you nothing of which you are not to speak 'a word while she lives'?"

"She has told me nothing, my lord."

The marquis drew a breath of relief. The face of the young creature before him could not lie! Helen's soul went out in thankfulness that he had no suspicion of the papers. These she had never opened.

"And if she had," said the marquis, laughing,

"what could it amount to? The word of a demented patient, muttered in delirium?"

Quietly Helen was moving toward the door.

"Stay. Do not be in such a hurry, unless you are afraid of me."

The young wife retraced her steps.

"If your mother should say anything; should make any fancied disclosure—as fever patients are always the prey of imagination—will you promise, Helen, to communicate it to me?"

"I cannot promise, my lord."

"Why not?"

"Because, if my mother wanted something done, I should do it, even if forbidden by you."

"You would be disobedient to my commands, then?"

"In that case, if I judged the command of my mother to be important, I would."

"And you would set up your own judgment against mine!" growled the husband, stopping in front of her, and fixing his glaring eyes upon her.

"I would try to do what is right," she faltered.

He muttered a bitter oath.

"Supposing what you were ordered to do should involve ruin to me?"

"If it were right, and my bounden duty, I would pray that I should not falter in doing it, for fear of consequences!"

Another terrific curse, that made the poor wife shudder.

"It is well I am warned!" ejaculated the marquis, between a sneer and an execration. "My wife would sacrifice me to her whim of proclaiming any lies a raving lunatic might utter, if she knew she would ruin me by doing it! Very well, my lady! I will take care of you!"

"My lord—"

"You may go now to your mother; but when she breathes her last, and from that moment, you shall have speech with no human being but myself!"

"Do you think she will die?"

"Think! she cannot live more than a day or two! Then—you are my prisoner! You shall have no chance to go about with your pretended disclosures! I will teach you, madam, the duty a wife owes her husband!"

The low, hoarse tone, the fierce glare of the eyes, the twitching of the convulsed lips, the ghastly pallor of the face, convinced Helen that he spoke in terrible earnest.

She could have sunk into the earth in her terror. He meant what he said. He penetrated the secret she had so nearly discovered; and his revenge would be terrible should he detect her agency in bringing it to light.

Again she moved toward the door.

"Remember," he said, with low, concentrated tones of force, "I married you to escape a greater evil! I paid a heavy price for what I enjoy; and you shall never deprive me of it. You shall walk a straight path, madam. Let me see you deviate from it, and you have yet to know what revenge and punishment mean!"

The white teeth gleamed through the bushy hair on his lips. Helen could not suppress a faint cry as she sprung to the door, unlocked it, and escaped into the hall.

She heard him laugh long and loudly; a laugh as full of menace as his words.

Long Helen sat beside her mother's bed, while she strove to calm the tumult of her thoughts, and bring her shaken nerves into subjection. She was by nature timid and shrinking; though the spirit within her rose to meet any emergency. What was she now to do?

She had no doubt of her husband's purpose; to prevent her making any disclosure when the time should come. As soon as her duty, and her mother's dying command should urge her to action, she would find herself fettered as with a chain of iron. Would that some power would direct her!

She stooped over the patient, who lay in undisturbed sleep. She turned her face slightly, so that her lips were close to her daughter's ear. Then she murmured distinctly the words:

"Remember, my child; remember."

Helen started and looked up. Chisholm sat, nearly asleep, on the other side of the room. She could not have heard the words. They came like the voice of a spirit—telling her what she must do. Yes; and how to do it, flashed that instant in her mind.

She would trust Alicia. She would find her that very night. She would bind her by the same promise she had given. Then, in the event of her mother's death her own agency would be effectually concealed.

She aroused Chisholm, and bade her sit by the invalid, while she retired to her own room for an hour or two. She requested not to be disturbed, as she might obtain some rest. Chisholm promised to remain.

Helen went to her room, and summoned her own maid. To her she said that she wished to go out for a while, and she was to guard the door, and admit no one on any pretext.

The girl readily undertook to do so. Helen then threw a dark serge cloak over her black silk dress, put on a hood which completely covered her face, and secured the important papers safely about her person. They were in a sealed packet, and the seal had never been broken.

She went out by a private door and staircase leading from her boudoir. The staircase led to a lower one, descending into the garden. Thence a narrow path, skirting the flower-beds, took her to a gate, usually locked on the inside. The key was in the lock.

Helen passed out into a back street, narrower than the one on which the mansion fronted.

It was late, but she gave herself no time to gather

fears or scruples. She ran to the corner of the next street, and some distance along that, before she dared to look for a cab. Then she saw an empty one, hailed it, and bade the man drive her to T—Hotel, in Berkeley square.

She alighted, and dismissed the cab. Drawing her hood closely over her face, she ran up a flight of stairs and stopped in the upper hall.

The halls and corridors were a blaze of light. A man in livery came toward her; and she timidly asked for Miss Maur.

"Certainly, miss, this way," said the servant—who took her for some lady's confidential maid. He turned into a side passage, went on some paces, and knocked at the door before he threw it open.

The room—the drawing of Lord Swinton's suit, was brilliantly lighted, and several voices were heard. Helen shrunk back, afraid of meeting strangers. The man who accompanied her, said, as he opened the door:

"A woman with a message for Miss Maur."

Alicia came to the door, and the servant retired.

Helen was hesitating what to say, when the girl caught sight of her face between the sides of the hood.

"Lady Estonbury!" she exclaimed in utter surprise; and grasping her arm, she tried to draw her into the room.

But Helen resisted. She merely wished to speak with Alicia one moment; she could not meet strangers! She retreated from the door into the hall.

Another ear had caught the name. The next moment Reginald Holmes came quickly out, grasped both the visitor's hands, and welcomed her warmly as "his dear sister Helen."

"Come in here!" said Alicia, opening another door, leading into an unoccupied apartment.

"Your mother?" inquired Reginald. "Is she better?"

"Ah, no!" cried Helen, speaking very quickly. "I must go back to her. But I dared not trust any messenger with these."

And she put the packet into Reginald's hands.

"I know I can trust you," she said.

"I gave a promise to my mother that I would say nothing while she lived. If her life is spared, she will do you right, Reginald. If she is taken away, it is my duty. But I might be prevented. I have thought it best to bring them while I am—at liberty."

Both her auditors understood her. Alicia pressed her in her arms.

"Reginald, you will spare my mother?" she faltered.

"This is sacred with me," he said, touching the seal, "till I have leave from you to open it."

"Do not wait to hear from me!"

"While your mother lives!"

"That is all I ask. Oh, thanks. Reginald, you have taken a weight from my mind. Now I must go."

Alicia entreated her to stay; but she refused.

"I must return. I may be missed."

"I will go with you," cried Reginald.

"No further than to place me in a cab. It would be known that I came to you."

Alicia clung to her friend with thanks and blessings; but she dared not detain her.

She returned to the drawing-room, where Wall-rade and two lawyers, solicitors of the baron and Reginald, were in conversation. But it was several days before they knew of the important addition to their evidence.

The cab deposited Helen at the garden gate and she unlocked it with the key. She hurried up the private stairway, and gained the upper hall before she took off the cloak. Her maid opened the door of the sitting-room.

"His lordship has been asking for you," she said. "I told him you were asleep."

Helen gave her the cloak and passed into the bed-chamber. There was a knock at the door. She opened it and the marquis stood facing her.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

A MONSTROUS WRONG.

LORD ESTONBURY stood still for a moment at the entrance; then, as his wife stepped back, he followed her into the room.

"Your maid said you were asleep," he remarked, with a sneer. "You do not look like one just awakened from slumber."

Helen was silent.

"You have been out," he added. Have you not?" Still no answer.

"It is strange that your maid should have been instructed to report a falsehood to me."

"She was not instructed to report anything," replied Helen.

"Then she ventured on it of her own accord. And you cannot persuade me to believe that she had not some object."

Helen was about to answer that she did not care to persuade him to anything, but she checked the retort, and merely observed, quietly:

"Ada had no idea of being disrespectful, my lord. I merely charged her not to admit any one."

"While you were absent. And where have you been, if I may ask?"

After some hesitation, the young lady replied:

"Pray excuse me from giving an account of myself. I did not know I was a prisoner on parole."

"You are a rebel to the authority of your lawful master."

"Will you permit me, now, to go to my mother?"

"When you tell me where you have been!"

"I cannot imagine why your lordship should be curious on the subject."

"Because you have been absent the best part of an hour; and your maid tried to deceive me. Your

hightened color, your excited manner, the dampness in your hair, the strange disorder in your looks, show that something unusual has occurred. It is your duty to be frank with me, as well as to obey me, at all times."

Helen's eyes flashed; but she repressed the rejoinder that rose to her lips.

"Will you tell me where you have been, or whom you have seen?"

"I do not think you would believe me, whatever I might say."

"Perhaps not; but I might gather a clew to hunt you, madam, through the mazes of deceit and treachery."

"Your lordship makes accusations, expecting to wring from me admissions of their truth. That is not fair to a suspected criminal."

"Tell me one thing; what is the promise you made to your mother, of which she continually reminds you, in her feverish talk?"

"Has your lordship heard her?"

"If I have not—it has been reported to me."

Helen started. Then Chisholm was a spy, placed to report all that passed!

"You will see that I know many things, madam, of which you deem me ignorant."

"Is it fair, or kind, my lord, to place a spy on your wife, when watching by the death-bed of her mother?"

"I shall protect myself at all hazards."

"But what do you apprehend?"

"That I shall not say."

"How can I do harm, supposing I had the wish?"

"You may stir up my enemies, and give me trouble."

"If you are conscious of no wrong, my lord, no one can injure you."

Again she attempted to leave the room.

As she did so, the marquis grasped her arm.

"You may now consider yourself a prisoner in earnest," he hissed in her ear. "Your lying maid will be discharged to-morrow. You are under observation. Every look, every word shall be watched and reported. And beware how you attempt to leave the house. If you wish to walk in the garden I will accompany you."

As he said these words with a fierce scowl, Helen bowed meekly, and passed him, going to the sufferer's room, at the other end of the corridor.

She found Chisholm in the easy-chair as before; the patient lying in an apparent stupor. Helen asked when the medicines or nourishment had been administered, and then took her place close beside the bed, pressing her lips to her mother's fevered hand, that lay on the silken coverlet.

Once she looked up at the woman in the easy-chair, who was aroused from her dozing, and sat upright, watching her.

"If you are tired, Mrs. Chisholm," she said, gently, "you may leave the room awhile. I shall stay here to-night."

"Your ladyship cannot watch all night again?"

"I am strong to-night. I do not feel the want of rest."

The woman rose wearily.

"I will ask his lordship's orders," she muttered as she went slowly out of the room.

Ay, "his lordship's orders!" Those of her mistress or the lady of the household, were nothing to her. But, Helen's mind was nerved to action, guided by the highest moral principle; and she did not care for humiliations.

"The word 'Helen!' very faintly uttered, like an expiring sigh, arrested her attention.

She stooped her ear close to the sufferer's lips.

"Helen—I am—going. You will do it?—the right—the right."

Helen dropped on her knees, and lifted her clasped hands solemnly upward.

"I will do it, mother!"

Again the lips unclosed; but no sound was audible. But the daughter, watching them, fancied they shaped the word "Swear."

"I have sworn it, mother, for the sake of the right! I swear it again for your sake!"

Then there was a tender smile, and a gleam of joy flitted over the dying face. The daughter had lifted the burden of sin from the soul about to take its final flight.

The door opened softly, and Chisholm came back.

"His lordship bids me stay with my lady," she said, as she resumed her seat.

No answer. Not a word was spoken for more than an hour. Then Helen offered to the patient some of the freshly-prepared nourishment Chisholm brought to the bedside.

She could not take it. The lips and eyes were firmly closed; though her hand clung with a faint pressure, to her daughter's.

Lord Estonbury came in and went up to the bed. A glance was sufficient.

After he had gone, a servant rode away from the door, to summon the physician.

He came in about an hour, looked at the dying woman, felt her pulse and forehead, then followed the marquis out of the room.

"The pulse had ceased at the wrist," he said.

"She will not see another sunrise."

"She will never speak again?" demanded his lordship.

"Never, certainly."

The doctor remained for the rest of the night. His lordship did not go back into the sick-room. He was sensible of a deep feeling of relief.

As the sun's first beams struggled through the curtained window, Helen was gently led from the sick-room by her faithful maid.

Ada took her to her own chamber, arranged the cushions of the couch for her, and brought her a cup of tea and biscuits on a silver tray.

Her young mistress could touch nothing.

But at the sound of a step in the hall, she suddenly started up, hurried to her escritoir and took a card from the drawer.

This she thrust into Ada's hand.

"Ada," she whispered, "if anything should happen to me, take this card to the lady whose name it bears. See: 'Miss Maur, Hotel —, Berkeley Square.'"

"I will, my lady," replied the maid, putting the card in her pocket, "Oh, my lady, I have wanted to say something. My lord says I must leave you."

Helen lifted her white face, full of anguish and despair.

"And at this time!" she murmured.

"Hush, my lady!" And at the instant the door opened to admit the marquis.

"What do you here?" he said, savagely, eying the trembling girl. "I forbade you to wait on Lady Estonbury."

"Pray, let her stay!" entreated Helen.

"Begone!" he commanded, fiercely. "You would hatch a plot between you, under my very eyes!"

A bitter curse on the treachery of woman followed.

"My lord," pleaded Helen, "Ada is my maid, and used to my ways! I implore you not to send her from me now!"

"Begone!" he reiterated. "Leave the house this instant! Chisholm shall send your things. Am I to be obeyed?"

The menacing tone left no alternative.

The maid came and knelt down before the mistress she loved, took her hand and kissed it. In one look Helen saw that she would do all her bidding.

Then Ada retired from the room.

"Now, madam," growled the tyrant, "you shall have an attendant proper for you, and faithful to my interests. Chisholm shall take the girl's place."

"I do not want Chisholm," wailed Helen.

"But I choose to place you in her charge."

"Let me stay alone."

"To steal out again, and meet some one in a conspiracy against your lawful lord."

"How can you speak so to me, at such a time?"

"Oh, you would not let times, nor rules, of etiquette, stand in your way! But I have clipped your wings, my lady; they will flutter against bars, hereafter!"

"Lord Estonbury!"

"Yes, madam, I do not care how soon you know it. I hate you; I have always hated you!"

"Why did you marry me?"

"Because I was forced into it! Your lady mother, who lies dead now, had my title and fortune in her power, and threatened to deprive me of them if I did not wed her daughter. As long as she lived, she could use this power; now I am free—free for hate and revenge!"

"I have never wronged you, my lord. I did not want you to marry me."

"But you are the cause of much trouble to me; and for that I shall punish you! You shall no longer enjoy the state and wealth I bought so dearly, and of which you would deprive me. If you could! I will be freed from your hateful presence—forever!"

"You will not live with me, you mean?"

"I will make my bed in the snake's den, before I will share a home with you! But I will not leave you free, to hatch conspiracies. You shall have a safe place."

"You cannot imprison me, my lord!"

"I cannot? We will see."

"You could not keep me a prisoner in your house?"

"I do not mean to."

"Whither would you send me?"

"I do not mind telling you. Do you remember once, driving over — Heath, the high walls of a secure retreat, with spikes on the top, and the grim old stone building above them? You asked what it was!"

"The — Heath Insane Hospital!" exclaimed Helen, with a cry of horror.

"Exactly; that is to be your home for life."

"But I am not insane! I have never been mad!" shrieked the terrified young creature, starting to escape from the room.

The tyrant intercepted her.

"A wife is insane who makes promises to a demented mother, to work harm to her husband! who steals out at night to meet some fellow-conspirator! Oh, my lady! your doom is sealed!"

"My lord! my lord! You will not do this cruel wrong! I have never been mad; you know it!"

"You may be driven so, shortly, by the sights and sounds you will have around you!" sneered the brute, a fierce malignant gleam of triumph showing his teeth through his dark mustache.

"My lord! if you are not just, at least be human! I will go into obscurity; I will obey you by keeping out of your sight, and living in poverty; but do not condemn me to a fate so horrible!"

She sunk on her knees; her deathly face upturned in frenzied supplication. But her tyrant had no mercy; he laughed, a laugh of fiendish malice.

"Not a word you can say will move me from my purpose!" he hissed in her ear. "I have already spread the report that your mind has given way from your vigils at your mother's sick-bed. Chisholm will take charge of you—and her husband will help her—till after the funeral. I suppose we must carry the deceased to Estonbury Court; you shall go, guarded, in a separate carriage, and with a medical attendant! Every scream, every appeal for help—remember—will tell against you! Immediately after the funeral, you will be removed to the Hospital."

"And it is your deliberate purpose to do this wickedness?" gasped the helpless prisoner.

"It is! You cannot escape your fate."

His hand was on the knob of the door.

"Then Heaven in mercy save me!" faltered Helen, as she sunk to the floor in a swoon.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

THE RIGHT SHALL BE!

THE news of the death of the Dowager Marchioness of Estonbury spread over London.

There was a meeting of Reginald Holmes, Lord Swinton, Wallrade, and his solicitors, to examine the evidence contained in the papers placed in his hands by young Lady Estonbury.

The packet was sealed with the late marquis's own seal, and had evidently never been opened since it was closed by his own hand. He had, it was manifest, wished to provide, under any circumstances of opposition, for the establishment in his rightful inheritance of his brother's son.

When the late marquis went on the Continent with his wife, he had news of his elder brother's escape from shipwreck, and his residence in Kaiserswerth.

The news had come privately to him, in a letter signed by Egbert, who was in failing health. He wished to see his brother before his death. Egbert had heard of his younger brother's accession to the title, and did not intend to disturb him in the enjoyment of the inheritance. His friends in England might continue to suppose him lost at sea.

The boy the noble pair carried with them from England sickened and died suddenly at Antwerp. Lord Estonbury had never doubted that this infant was his own son, and his wife did not deceive him. His grief at the loss was the greater because he looked forward to the accession of the detested heir-at-law, Maurice Howard, whom he knew to be a villain unworthy of a place in the peerage of England.

His first visit to his brother was before the birth of little Reginald. Four months later, Egbert wrote for him. He was then near death, and anxious for the future of his infant boy. He placed him solemnly in the care of his brother.

"Bring him up as your own," he said. "May God deal by you as you deal by him."

Lord Estonbury received the trust, promising fidelity. After his elder brother's death he went to Italy with his wife.

It was at the solicitation of Lady Estonbury that the boy passed as their own son. She urged that they might continue in the enjoyment of the magnificent income and the ancient title. Both would fall to Reginald in due course of time.

His lordship consented to the fraud.

But he lavished a tenderness on the boy which few but fathers could feel. He took possession of the marriage-certificate and such papers as might be necessary to prove the legitimacy of Reginald's birth, and drew up a full statement of his father's escape from shipwreck, his marriage with a poor country girl, and residence on the Rhine; her death followed by his, etc. A certificate of the birth and baptism of the child accompanied Egbert's solemn recognition of Almeria Stenhaus as his lawful wife and the mother of his heir, with the declaration of two witnesses of the marriage, and other necessary papers.

His lordship added his own declaration that he held the title and estates in trust for his infant nephew, and it was his purpose to surrender them to him when he came of age, etc.

These papers had been intended to secure the inheritance to Reginald, in case of his rights being disputed. Lady Estonbury had been compelled to promise that they should be carefully preserved. But she had persuaded her husband from time to time after Reginald came of age, to put off the important declaration and surrender.

His lordship's sudden death by apoplexy released her from his control.

She had long wished to make her daughter the marchioness; and we have seen how she tried to accomplish her schemes.

But she had religiously preserved the papers, placing them in a secret compartment of her cabinet. Only the fear of death and the awful judgment that must follow had led her to confide the secret to her daughter, enjoining it upon her to do justice when she should have passed from earth.

The papers completed the links of evidence, leaving no doubt, or room for question, that Reginald Vane Thorpe was the rightful Marquis of Estonbury.

It was decided to commence proceedings immediately after the funeral of the late dowager.

The papers were ready to be served on the man who now held the title wrongfully through his London solicitors.

The entire household, it was ascertained, had set out that morning for Estonbury Court, bearing in a hearse the body of the deceased dowager.

On the evening of that day, Ada, the discarded maid, came to the Hotel T—, in Berkeley Square, and asked for Miss Maur.

She was at once received by Alicia, who was astonished when she heard that his lordship had discharged her, in his fury at her supposed connivance at Lady Estonbury's last visit to her at the hotel.

"Do you think he had discovered where your lady went?" she asked.

"I cannot tell," was the answer. "I think he only suspected. I was on the watch, and I let no one in. That old cat, Chisholm, came peering round; but I sent her about her business; and then my lord came, with that heavy scowl, and asked for my mistress, which I told his lordship she was sleeping. She came in directly after that."

"He could not have discovered anything if none of the servants saw her."

"None of them did, I am sure of that, miss. But oh, miss, I was nearly dead with the fit of trembling, the next day—yesterday morning—when my lord

went in to my lady, and bade me begone, as I was never to wait on her again! And I listened at the door, miss, and heard him tell her she was a prisoner, and the two Chisholms should be her jailers, and she should never be set free; never at all."

"Did he threaten that?"

"Ay, miss, and worse! He said he was going to shut her in the — Heath mad-house, after the funeral! Her mother's funeral—poor dear!"

"Did you hear him say that?"

"Indeed I did, miss; and when he went out of the room calling for Chisholm, I peeped in, and saw my poor, dear lady lying all in a heap on the floor, like a snow-drift!"

Alicia ran to the bell and rung it in great excitement. She ordered her father and Reginald sent for; Wallrade too; and she began putting on her traveling dress, while she gathered all the information the weeping Ada could give her.

It was so touching to think that the poor creature had sent her only friend to crave succor of her, in her terrible dread of the vengeance of a villain.

When the gentlemen came, a few words sufficed. There was not one dissenting voice.

That same night the party, including Alicia and Ada, set out for Estonbury Court.

But it was after noon of the following day before they arrived at the village near it.

The deceased dowager had lain in state during that and the preceding day, and the funeral was to take place on the next.

What news of the young marchioness?

The story had been whispered about that her ladyship's reason had given way under the strain of her mother's death. She had worn herself out with watching. His lordship was in great distress about her. She had not been able to leave her room; nor had she been seen by any of the servants.

Ada, her late maid, took advantage of the confusion to mingle with the other house-maids; but she could learn nothing except that the two Chisholms had charge of their young lady; that she had eaten nothing, drank nothing, and had not been "herself" since her bereavement.

The husband's purpose was manifest.

But her rescuers could do nothing till the funeral procession had left the house.

That was late on the following morning.

It was a very handsome funeral; as magnificent as the deceased could have desired in her lifetime. The plumed hearse; the train of mourners; the costumed outriders; the religious solemnities of the occasion; all were in keeping. In one of the long train of carriages, open sufficiently for the crowd to see, Lord Estonbury was seated, in deep mourning, and with a countenance composed and sad. None of the carriages contained his wife.

As the procession left the gates, young Reginald Vane Thorpe, with his companions, Wallrade and Alicia, conducted by Ada, went up the marble steps to the grand portico and colonnade.

Wallrade demanded to see Lady Estonbury.

The man answered that she was too ill to see them.

But Reginald thrust him aside, and strode on through the halls so familiar to him; so soon again to own him as their master.

Ada led the way up-stairs, and a group of wondering, half-terrified servants followed.

"These were her rooms," she said, touching a door.

They were locked; but at the command of Reginald the house-keeper advanced, keys in hand.

"Where is your mistress?" Alicia asked.

The woman answered defiantly that her mistress would see no visitors. And she added that it was very strange—this intrusion, at the time when there had been a death in the family.

Wallrade took the dame, bristling in her stiff black dress, aside.

"My good woman," he said, "we may as well be short with you. This gentleman"—pointing to Reginald—"is the rightful Marquis of Estonbury; and he is in his own house."

The woman held up her spread hands, but was staggered when she saw the look of authority on Reginald's handsome features.

"And we mean to see your lady," added Wallrade. "There is foul play at work, and we mean to save her."

The cowering housekeeper unlocked the door of the suit of rooms belonging to young Lady Estonbury. They were empty!

"Perhaps you would like to see his lordship's and my lady the dowager's?" she demanded, dryly, with compressed lips.

"If you please," was the calm reply.

All these were unlocked in turn. All were unoccupied.

"Now, where is your lady?"

"How can I tell? If she was mad, and her screams disturbed the house, it was right in his lordship to order her conveyed to a safe place, was it not?"

The gentlemen looked at each other. Was it possible that the victim had already been consigned to her living sepulcher?

Just then Ada, who had gone up another flight of stairs, ran in and whispered that she had caught a glimpse of Mr. Chisholm peering down over the stairs from the very topmost flight.

The party instantly ascended.

Wallrade was foremost and clutched Chisholm as he endeavored to steal behind the balustrade, on his way to a room, which, they were all convinced, contained a prisoner. Moans were distinctly heard within it.

Chisholm struggled with his captor, and finding he could not escape, called to his wife to bolt the door against the intruders.

But she came out, curious to know who had come, and was confronted by Reginald.

He thrust her aside and went in, followed by Alicia.

It was a large and lofty room, lighted only by a skylight, and destitute of furniture, except two or three mattresses and some pillows heaped in one corner.

There on the floor, her face buried in the pillows, lay the hapless Lady Estonbury.

At the sound of voices and footsteps, she gave a wild shriek, and strove to conceal herself behind the cushions, for she supposed they had come to remove her to the mad-house.

Alicia flew to her, and kneeling down, flung her arms around her, crying and sobbing. Reginald lifted her from the ground and supported her, while he exclaimed:

"Helen, dear sister! Do not be alarmed! you are safe now."

She looked from one to another, bewildered, while Dame Chisholm wrung her hands, sobbing:

"Oh, my lady! my poor dear lady!"

"You are come to save me!" gasped Helen.

"You will not let them take me to that dreadful prison?"

And, while both her friends assured her of safety, she swooned in their arms.

"Take her with you in the carriage—to the inn!" cried Wallrade. "I will deal with these!"

While Reginald, assisted by Alicia and Ada, bore the insensible form down-stairs, the gentleman was informing the Chisholms of the change of proprietorship of the Estonbury estates.

It was the argument of all others to compel their obedience. The dame, convinced that Reginald was the true master of the mansion, volubly excused herself for her part of the business, and busied herself in packing up her lady's trunks, to be sent after her.

And she and her husband interfered to prevent any opposition from the rest of the household to the removal of their lady.

Helen was taken to the best chamber the inn afforded, and a medical man was sent for. She recovered her senses only to be seized with convulsions, and the surgeon pronounced her threatened with brain fever.

Quiet and judicious treatment, he hoped, might avert it; and that she was sure to have with such friends around her!

Wallrade continued to walk the terrace in front of the Estonbury mansion till the return of the carriages after the funeral obsequies.

He at once addressed the marquis, and requested him to step aside and hear what he had to say.

In a few words he made him acquainted with the state of affairs on all sides. His lordship affected infinite contempt for the pretensions of Reginald, but was furious at his wife's escape. He swore he would pursue her with the officers of the law.

"Stop. One word, if you please," said Wallrade. "I see you do not remember me as well as I do you. I had the pleasure once of knowing you under another name."

The marquis started and grew pale.

"Gilbert Breck, you cannot have forgotten a certain paper—a forgery—about which some noise was made twenty-five years since. That paper is in existence, though the firm forbore to prosecute a young man of such excellent family. It is in my possession. Shall I produce it?"

The effect of the threat was instantaneous on the detected villain. It was but one of the many crimes he had committed; yet it sufficed to bring him to terms, so far as regarded his intended victim.

Wallrade joined his friends at the inn, armed with the assurance that they were in no danger of being molested.

Helen was able to travel in two days, and went by easy stages to London. Her home was with Alicia Maur, who declared she never would part with her. Was she not Reginald's own cousin, and the benefactress of both?

The suit for the recovery of Reginald's rights was brought, and the marquis, as he called himself, instructed his solicitors and counsel to oppose it to the utmost. But, as soon as they knew the evidence arrayed against them, they saw the folly of opposition, and threw up the case.

Reginald was again Marquis of Estonbury.

Maurice Howard left England without attempting to see his wronged wife. She heard, not a year afterward, of his death on a steamer crossing the Mediterranean.

Lady Helen Howard—for she kept her married name—made her home with her beloved friends, the Marquis and Marchioness of Estonbury.

How happy were Reginald and Alicia in their union our readers may imagine; since they, like the noble being to whom they owed their happiness, had ever esteemed

"The Right above all."

THE END.

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